

10¢ Ace-High WESTERN STORIES

TWO GRIPPING NOVELETTES OF THE OLD WEST

DEATH WAITS FOR THE
RANSOM HERD

By JAY KARTH

THE VIGILANTES
OF HELL'S HALF-ACRE

By NORMAN A. FOX



HOLLAND LYNCH
GUNNISON STEELE
ELI COLTER
AND MANY OTHERS

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THE BEST VARIETY IN ANY WESTERN MAGAZINE

THE COWBOY'S MAGAZINE

10¢ Ace-High WESTERN STORIES

Vol. II, No. 3

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BALANCED IN BLOOD

THE setting sun behind the pines cast dark shadows across the stream. The air was still with the hush that descends in the quiet hour before dusk. The smoke from the man's pipe spiralled upward in slow blue coils. He straightened his tired back with a sigh, and then bent downward and scooped up a panfull of glistening pebbles. A moment later his fifteen-year-old son, a few feet farther downstream, went through the same motions. From time to time the man and the boy exchanged a few quiet words, but for the most part they were silent. There was a deep, respectful understanding between them that had no need of speech.

Now, in the silence, each was deeply engrossed in his own thoughts. The boy's were colored with the bright, changing hues that paint the dreams of youth; the man's were deep and somber. Had he done right, he asked himself for the thousandth time, to bring his boy away from the cities of the east and into this vast, indifferent wilderness? He searched deep into his being for the answer, and it came to him again, the same as it had always come. Yes. He had done right. He had brought this lad into a land where a man had to rely upon his wits and his strength and his courage in order to survive . . . and not in greed or cunning. He had brought him into a land where the fight for existence was a clean fight against a fair foe—nature, and not a degrading struggle against weaker or more ruthless men. Here his boy would learn the rules of the game as it was meant to be played before commerce corrupted trade, and law perverted justice. . . .

The man lifted his head from his work and turned to face his boy. At the same moment, as though some telepathic message had flashed between them, the lad looked up.

"Hi, Ed," said the man.

"Lo pop," the youth answered.

It was their own way of saying that everything was all right; that things were as they should be.

The gunfire shattered the stillness with a terrific roar that echoed and rum-

bled back and forth between the hills like dying thunder. The man pitched face forward into the stream. Blood spurted from his throat rhythmically, staining the water. The boy crumpled slowly to the bank. He saw his father fall, and he knew in an instant that he was dead. He saw two men leap from the opposite bank and wade across the stream. Their faces were indelibly stamped into his memory in that eternal second before the world began to reel sickeningly before his eyes as he plunged into a bottomless pit of darkness. . . .

IT WAS night when he regained consciousness, but the air before him was red. Flames still ate hungrily through the walls and roof of the cabin that had been his home. Showers of sparks exploded toward the stars. The boy raised himself to his feet, and standing before the flaming funeral pyre of his youth, he raised his arms upward and vowed a silent oath. And the unvoiced words of that oath were to make a deadly, ruthless outlaw, were to fill his life with bitter loneliness, and bitter hatred. The surge of his painful emotions sapped the strength from his weakened body, and he sank once more into oblivion. . . .

Ed roamed the countryside meaninglessly, living like an injured animal that has lost the herd. The hatred inside him had died to dull, smouldering embers, leaving his mind blank. It was in this condition that Tip McClellen's gun-hands found him, and saw that he would make good recruiting material for the gang. They fed him and clothed him and taught him all the dirty tricks that a western owlhooter had to know. And because there was a deep emptiness inside him, the boy learned these lessons well.

For a long time the gang had watched the bank of the little town of Brant's Crossing. Finally the hour to strike came. Ed had been posted as a lookout several hours previously, and now it was with numb apprehension that he watched McClellen's riders enter the town. The whole thing was over in a few brief moments,

(Continued on page 6)

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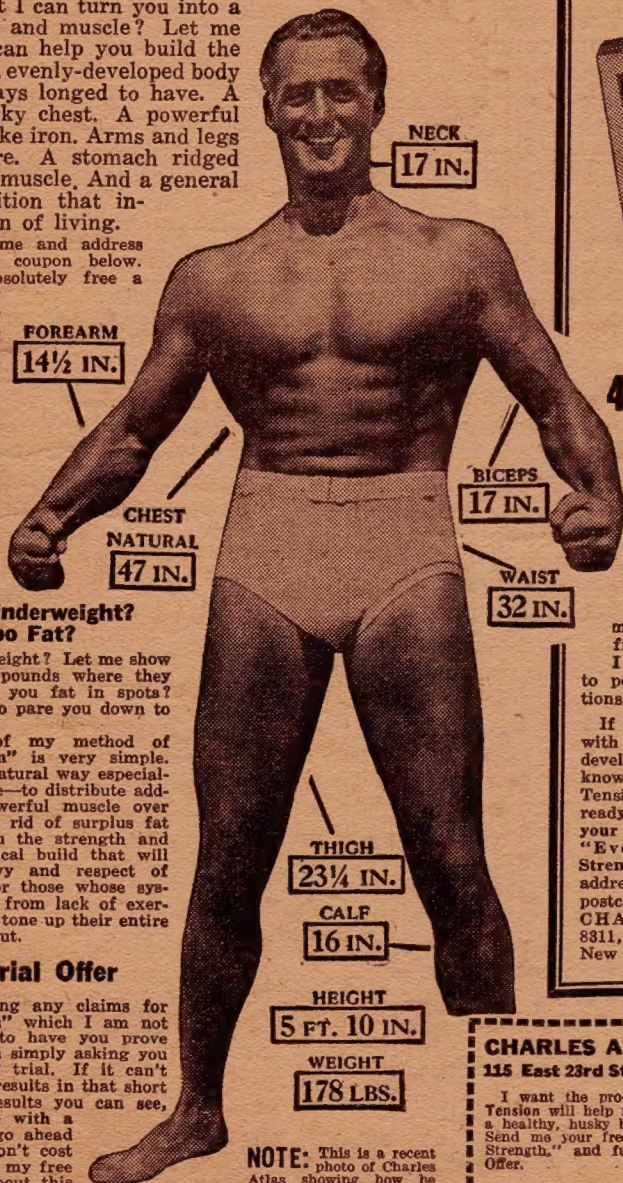
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(Continued from page 4)

but to the boy it lasted for an agonized eternity. He looked on in horror while hired killers mercilessly and needlessly gunned down all who came within range of their gun's. He saw unarmed men crumple into the dust and spill their blood. He saw the brutal killers grin savagely with the lust of murder. And at that moment all the emotions and feelings that had died within the boy on that red night of death, suddenly came to fierce life again. With an inarticulate scream he drew his gun and thundered lead at the men of his gang. He fired until his gun was empty, and then he spurred cruelly away into the hills.

Ed rode until exhaustion overcame him, and as he rode new fuel was added to the hatred burning in his soul. The brutality and cowardice he had seen filled him with a deep loathing for his fellow men, and he swore that he would never again be one of them. From that time on, he rode alone.

HE BECAME a killer. There was no question about that, even though many have since claimed his guns never spoke except in the words of justice. Ed was not concerned with justice—he was concerned only with the hate for those who lived by gunsmoke and death. That he himself became a legend of ruthless gun-speed, was a strange paradox that his bitter young mind could not explain. He knew only that his father had died and his youth had died in the roar of Colts, and that something deep within him had been mortally stricken on that day when blood soaked into the streets of Brant's Crossing.

For ten years Ed rode the owlhoot alone. For ten years killers tensed uneasily when they crossed the barren hills that he had made his domain. But by this time Ed had met both of his father's

murderers and blasted them to hell. Now the taste of death was like old brass in his mouth, and like lead deep inside of him. He felt a weariness that was strange in a man not yet twenty-five. He needed rest.

Ed built a small cabin with his own hands, started a herd and watched it grow. It was then that he met Helen Berkley. He didn't know that he was in love with her. All he knew was that when he was with her the air he breathed was sweeter and the sky more blue than he had ever known it before; that a deep peace came over him and left him rested. They married.

In the work of the present, and the hope of the future Ed forgot the past, and life became for him a thing more fine than he had ever imagined. He thought that his days as a killer were forever past. He was wrong. There was a man in town who took an immediate dislike toward Ed. It was one of those baseless hatreds that sometimes spring up between two men and can only be ended by conflict. This man taunted Ed, insulted him—did everything possible to draw him into a gun fight. Ed gritted his teeth and kept his six-guns holstered. But he knew, deep inside of him, that one day he would have to kill again. That day came the next time he went into town. As Ed passed by the Arrowhead Saloon, the man came lurching drunkenly through the batwings. He saw Ed and cursed vilely. For a moment Ed lost his iron self-control. His fist lashed out, sent the drunk crashing backward. The man sprang to his feet with an oath, hand reaching for the gun at his side.

"This is the moment," thought Ed. "This is the moment when I will have to kill again . . . or die."

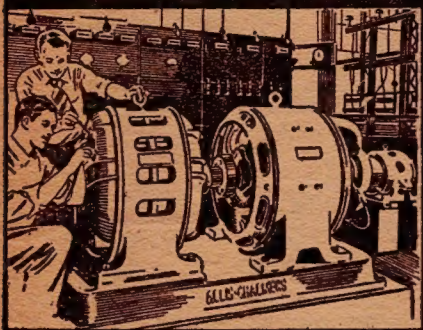
"Daddy!" cried a small, anguished voice. "My daddy!" A little lad ran across the street and threw himself protectively before the man. His little chin trembled with emotion, and tears sprang into his eyes. But he was too late. Ed's gun had already left its holster, and the man triggered a wide shot. By all rules and rights, Ed would have been justified in returning that shot. But somehow his gun found its way back to the holster.

Ed rode back to his ranch thoughtfully. This was something that had never happened before . . . something he could not quite understand. Then a strange happiness came over him as he realized that only now was his old debt fully paid . . . now that he had given a youth his father.

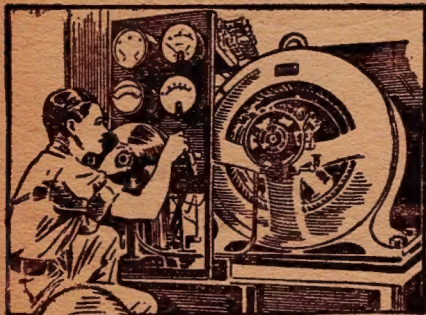
THE EDITORS.



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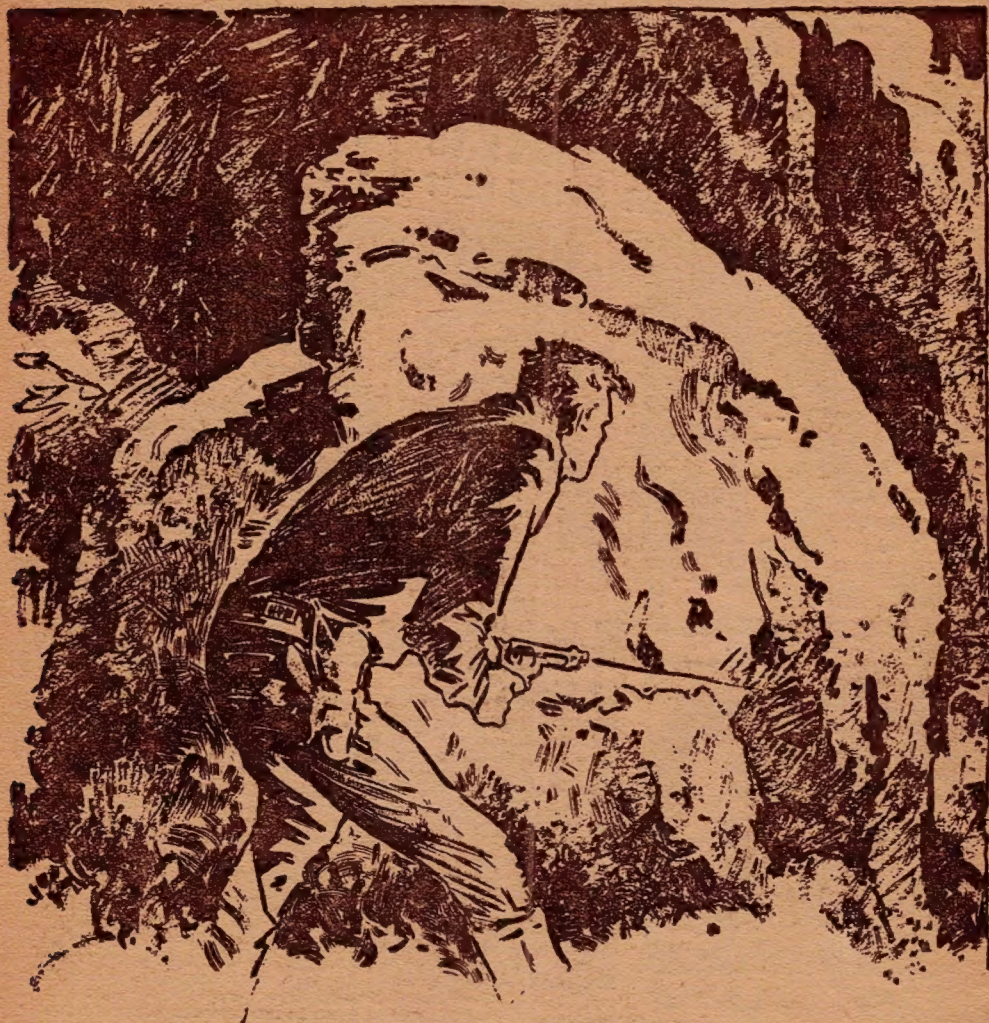
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OUTLAW KING



Mike chopped down one of the punchers. . . .

By ED EARL REPP

CHAPTER ONE

Death on the Prod

"Stop Stony Barrows!" were Ranger Mike Hendan's orders. "Kill him if you have to, but stop him — at any cost!" But Mike soon learned that to kill the stubborn old range boss would end the bitter range feud which was making the streets of Brasada run red . . . and start a gunsmoke hell that would sweep the entire county into bloody, devastating ruin!

CAPTAIN McNELLY'S words rang ironically in Mike Hendan's ears as he stood in the cottonwoods with Luff Sterrett and listened to the blasting roar of feud guns tearing Brasada town apart. McNelly had said:

OF THE BIG BEND



Smashing Lawman Novelette

"Stop Old Stony Barrows! Reason with him if you can. Kill him if you have to—but stop him at any cost!" A big order, Mike reflected morosely.

Both the Texas Rangers knew that no one but the devil himself could stop Old Stony, he-coon of the Big Bend, now that he had set himself on a course of action that could have no result but a bloody

range feud. And the fight had already started, before they hit town.

From their position among the trees at the bend of the river they could see the white-walled, two-story adobe building in which Old Stony and his faithful had entrenched themselves. Through the shattered windows of Barrow's Big Store lashed pale spurts of gunflame. The shady

street rocked to the concussion of exploding powder, and dark splotches marked where lead had blasted the plaster from the adobe walls.

Across from the Big Store squatted a half dozen smaller structures. Behind the stout wooden shutters of every window lay an ambushed gunman. The walls of the Land Office, the dry goods store, and other small places of business hid the Brasada cowmen, who, under Cort Jerome's colors, were returning Old Stony's lead. The street was swept clean of life. Horses, men, even cur dogs, were absent; but lying half under a water trough was the body of a man in a green plaid shirt.

SERGEANT LUFF STERRETT dropped his cigarette and ground it out. A grim smile showed through the dust on his young, sunburned face.

"Seems we're a little on the late side," he muttered. "Shall we sit down and wait for the war to end, or ride back to Sumner and wire the militia?"

"We'll do neither," Mike Hendan frowned. He was only a few years older than Luff, but those years had been passed in the ranger service, and they had stamped him with the marks of shrewdness and fight wisdom. "By the looks of things, this battle's just begun. We're going to barge in on Old Stony and Jerome and make them listen to us."

Luff turned his hazel eyes on him quickly. "Risky, ain't it?" he protested. "They'd ship us out of Brasada in crates if we so much as rode down the main street."

"We'll have to chance that." Mike spoke thoughtfully, as if he were still worrying the thing out in his mind.

All the way from Eagle Pass he had resented being harnessed for a tough job with as green a hand as Luff. Hardly twenty, the boy was quick-thinking and able, but as yet untried under fire. Mike felt responsibility bearing heavily upon

him as he made his decision—the only one possible in keeping with McNelly's uncompromising order.

"There's a lot more than our two lives at stake if this war runs its course. It'll be women and children next. Old Stony's the kind of a crazy damned fool who'll fight until hell freezes and then cuss at you from the ice. Stubborn and tough and plenty smart. It takes a pig-headed gent like that to deny water and feed to a whole, drouth-burned range that's facing ruination."

"Wonder what his angle is, Luff mused. "He runs cattle himself, as well as owning the biggest mercantile in ten counties and having a corner on all the feed in sight. You'd think if he was any kind of a cowman at all he'd help his neighbors out. But he raises the price of feed until it's prohibitive, and then dams up his water!"

"Maybe a talk with the old hard-shell himself will clear things up," said Mike. Not without apprehension, he swung into the saddle and gazed down the shot-torn street. "Whack leather, cowboy! You're going to drop in on Cort Jerome while I beard Old Stony Barrows in his den. Polish up that star and keep your hands away from your Colts. That way we've got a ten-ninety chance of not joining that lonesome puncher under the water trough."

But the conviction fastened on him like a leech, that this was the longest shot he had backed in five years of gun-gambling. Two desperate, hot-blooded factions awaited them in the adobe-walled canyon of death, and either one might resent interference by the law. But Mike Hendan's tall body had gone unsinged through the hottest fires border-hopping outlaws could stoke, and he didn't hesitate to urge his pony to a quick walk. Less carelessly, plainly nervous, Luff rode in beside him as they approached the Big Store. Neither of them spoke.

THERE was a vicious quality to the battle that spoke of pent-up virulence erupting the only way it could—in flame and lead. This was a war spawned by hatred. Mike Hendan had the story second-hand. He was making no diagnosis until he knew all the symptoms. Old Stony Barrows, hearsay informed him, had seen the drouth coming, cornered the feed market, and built himself a mud dam against the time of need. He had year-around springs up in the hills, so that even when the Rio was a mere ribbon of mud skirting the ranches, he had plenty of water for the whole range.

The drouth was here—had been for six months—and Old Stony was charging seventy-five dollars a ton for hay and similar prices on everything he carried in his gigantic stock of goods. Molten gold didn't come much higher than his water.

Cort Jerome, biggest rancher in the Boquillas Valley, that lay north and east of Brasada, finally banded the harassed cattlemen under an all-for-one, one-for-all pact. The Boquillas Cattle Association, they called it, vowing it was torture and damnation Barrows was handing them, and that the BCA was ready to go to war to make him sell at decent prices. Mike suspected the Association was no more than a shiny veneer of legality with which to dazzle the law when an investigation came . . . after they had their way with the aging mercantile man. But if what he had heard of the war was correct, he was wishing them luck.

Old Stony's name had spelled sledgehammer power in the Big Bend too long. He ran his cattle over thousands of acres and stood for no horseplay among his punchers or his neighbors. Men who came to grips with him soon learned their mistake. The giant trader knew how to apply the pressure to break them—financially, or with his maul-like fists. But this time Stony had stepped out of line.

They were opposite the deserted saloon

now, only a hundred feet from where bullets criss-crossed the street and ricocheted screaming off the adobe walls. Acrid fumes of black powder stung their nostrils. Smoke hung motionless on the still air. Mike held his skittish bronc down with a hand of iron.

"Hallo!" he shouted, and his empty hands went up shoulder high.

The firing stuttered and broke. A dangerous silence sprang up. Through it came Mike's booming voice again. "Hold your fire! We want a palaver with you. This is the law!"

The hush held while they dismounted. Then, from the Big Store, a voice of thunder rolled: "Get the hell out of this town, you two! We want no meddlin' badge-freighters!"

"You'll take our meddling and like it," Mike cracked out. "I'm comin' in!" To Luff, he whispered: "Hang an' rattle, kid! Wish I felt as tough as that gent sounds!"

Slowly they began to pace through the dust of the street, their paths diverging. Mike was taut with apprehension as he watched Luff move away. Then once again Old Stony Barrows was bawling fury-filled threats.

"Come another ten feet and by God I'll blow your head off!"

The sheer viciousness of the threat made Mike pause in his stride. With the hesitation hardly perceptible, he walked on. . . .

The round black eye of a rifle peeped from the corner of a window. Mike walked stiffly, his arms held out from his body. Four feet . . . six feet . . . eight. . . .

Suddenly Mike had crossed the deadline!

Silence within the Big Store. Then: "Oh—hell! Open the door, Rust."

The muscles around Mike Hendan's mouth loosened, and he stepped briskly across the raised, packed-dirt sidewalk. Bars clanked behind three inches of seasoned oak. Mike had to turn sideways to

slide through the narrow slot that was granted him.

Inside, he blinked back the tears that a wave of burned powder brought to his smarting eyes. Thick, undulating coils of blue smoke made the details of the interior dim.

Dozens of unlighted lamps hung from the ridge logs by chains. Mike got a confused impression of a high-ceilinged room as big as a hay barn, piled to the *vigas* with goods. Racks of Indian blankets hung from the ceiling, saddles and leather goods loomed dimly in a corner, bolts of gingham and woolens were stacked on shelves along the rear wall. Mingled with the bite of gunsmoke were the odors of boxes of apples, hanging twists of tobacco, salty rawhide leather.

SIX or seven men hunkered beneath the thick sills of the windows, their eyes turned to the ranger. Rust, the lank, sleazy man who had admitted him, gave him a measuring glance with his fishy blue eyes. He appeared unimpressed with what he saw, for he faced away and sent the bars thundering home into their sockets. His long, steel-wire frame bent into a vigilant crouch beneath the window once more. For Mike's money, the man looked too cold to have human feelings, too shifty to be trustworthy.

Then from a window to the right of the door arose a bearded giant with a Sharps .45-90 gripped in hairy hands. One glance told Mike this was Old Stony Barrows, the he-devil of the Big Bend. Barrows would never see the shiny side of sixty again, but he looked as tough as a gnarled old oak. Crisp hair, that had once been red but now was graying, overflowed the neck of his buckskin shirt. His body was huge and barrel-bellied, thewed with whang-leather muscles. Cold and forbidding in appearance, with a heavy, sandy-gray beard, he couldn't disguise the little laugh wrinkles that crowded around his

eyes. But he seldom laughed these latter days, with a whole range challenging his rule. Old Stony impaled the ranger with a flint-tipped gaze.

"Now what the hell do you want here, stickin' your greenhorn nose into my private war?" he demanded.

Mike met the cold steel of Barrow's gaze. "So you're doing what you bragged you would," he retorted. "Bringing this country to its knees, even if you have to use guns to do it."

"I made no such brag," Old Stony barked. "That's one of Cort Jerome's lying tales. But I did say I wouldn't sell Jerome a straw of hay or a pint of water for love or money—and I won't! This is my way of showin' 'em I mean business. They demanded hay or lead this morning . . . and I'm givin' 'em lead."

"What do you mean—them? Why won't you sell to the rest of the Boquillas men?"

Barrow's jaws worked under the mat of curly whiskers. "I would, if they'd cut loose from Jerome," he grouched. "Long as they hang together, demanding feed and water for him as well as themselves, they'll get nothing."

His stubby thumb plugged a shell into the buffalo gun. "You can take that back to McNelly and let him make what he can of it, badge toter. But when the whole U. S. Army is surrounding this place, Old Stony Barrows will still be a-settin' on the floor, squinting along the barrel of a Sharps at anything that moves!"

CHAPTER TWO

Lawman's Gun Choke

GROWLS of assent came from the other men, most of them punchers on Barrows' big Arrow B ranch, by the looks of them. Mike Hendan met their hostile glances with a hard, unflinching stare of his own. His sun-puckered gray eyes,

sharp with the searching of far horizons, focussed calculatingly on the trader and his men. Inwardly, he was stumped for a next move.

Then movement stirred behind the long counter at the ranger's left, and someone came through the foggy atmosphere. Mike's head jutted forward, incredulously, when he saw a girl's face through the powdersmoke.

"Recruitin' women into your army, Barrows?" he asked scornfully.

"Try and keep that filly of mine out of it," Barrows rumbled, and the ranger caught a sparkle in his reddish-brown eyes, a ring of pride in his voice. "Tried to send her up to El Paso a month ago, and—you see what good it done!" He put a scowl between his eyes. "Kathleen, you know what I told you about keeping away from the windows. That snake across the street would kill you if he thought it would break me. Get back to your reloadin' now."

"In a minute, Dad." Kathleen Barrows stood, small and shapely, beside her father. She wore a fringed leather skirt and snug half-boots. Her rich auburn hair, brushing slim shoulders, was the hue Old Stony's might have been at one time, with more fire in it. Freckles lightly sprinkled her tanned face, and her eyes were a dark, smoky gray.

"Dad would never tell you this, so I'm going to," she said to Mike. "This fight between Jerome and him isn't new. It's been going on since a year before I was born. Dad and Jerome—"

"Kathleen!" Wrath filled Old Stony's face. "That's neither here nor there. You know I don't discuss that—never. Listen, mister—"

"No, for once you're going to listen, Dad," Kathleen insisted. "This river's a lot deeper than it looks from where you're standing, lawman. Cort Jerome is of the breed that makes a fine art of holding a grudge. He's held one against Dad for

twenty-one years. Jerome and my father both loved the same girl, but she was the discerning kind and finally married Dad, even though he was fifteen years older than she. Jerome always claimed she married him for his money. He made that the basis of his hate. But Mother chose Dad because she loved him. They were still sweethearts the day she died."

Old Stony Barrows listened in bitter silence. Mike saw moisture glistening in his eyes, and in that moment he made himself a bet that, even though the trader was a hard and prideful man now, Kathleen's mother had never known him as anything but kind and gentle.

"Cort Jerome got his revenge fifteen years ago, when he framed a murder charge on my father. Dad served ten years, and he wasn't a young man when he went in. But he came back and made a fortune all over again. If he's made things as hard as he could for Jerome, he's always worked in the open. Do you blame him, now, for refusing to help out the man who sent him to prison and ruined him?"

Surprise kept Mike's lips sealed for a moment. Then he was shrugging: "I'm not a judge of right and wrong, Miss Barrows. I'm just here to stop useless killings. And I'll do it if I have to send back for all the rangers in Texas. My partner is with Jerome's bunch right now, trying to persuade them to lay down their guns. If they agree and you don't, Barrows—we'll be forced to throw our guns and authority in with them to stop you!"

Old Stony sank his head forward and his eyes slitted. "You throw them guns anywhere you damn please, mister! As for authority—I make my own laws. Now you hike over to Mister Snake-Blood Jerome's and do as you like about sidin' him. I reckon our lead will puncture law-hide as well as any other."

"You're not helping our case any," Kathleen cut in, frowning at her father. "Why not tell them again that they can

buy all the water and feed they want, if they'll quit Jerome? This isn't their fight. He's just hooked them for their guns."

Mike studied her, knowing admiration for the cool competence she exhibited. His gaze transferred to the trader as Old Stony fingered his whiskers.

"I'll go one better than that," the barrel-bellied old timer conceded thoughtfully. "Tell 'em this, Ranger. I'll furnish every man of 'em with free hay and water for a month, if they'll desert Jerome's BCA!"

Mike searched the seamed, intense features, keening for treachery. But he read only frankness there.

"Now you're talking sense," he said curtly. "I'll see what they've got to say to that. Give me ten minutes with him before you fire another shot."

Old Stony's strong hands hurled back the bars. Make it snappy," he growled. He pulled the portal back a few inches.

Mike slid out and stood for a moment on the sidewalk, while the door thundered behind him. Darkness flowed in from the dry bosque of the Rio. A dark army of shadows was marching into the feud-town. Through the dusk and stillness he strode across the street.

He had his hand raised to pound on the door of the Land Office when a Winchester cracked wickedly behind him. Orange flame spurted from an end window of the Big Store, and lead drove through the crown of Mike's stetson and hammered it against the panels.

Then, in quick succession, four more guns roared, and Mike felt a twinge of pain at the base of his neck!

IT WAS the first time that Ranger Mike Hendan had felt like murdering a man. During the brief interval in which he stood stiffly against the door with lead slapping pine planks beside him, he cursed Old Stony Barrows and the treacherous heart of him. His Colts were in his hands,

blasting at the shuttered windows. It came to Mike that this was a hell of a way to die—back to the wall and eight gunmen cutting you to pieces. He wondered if this was how the young puncher under the water trough had died.

Over in the Big Store, the giant trader roared like a madman. Mike could envision him slapping a fat thigh with his open palm, cavernous mouth belching laughter. The big Sharps bellowed. Then the firing ended.

It was the dusk, and the dusty-gray of Mike's levis and vest, that saved him. That, and the fact that someone pulled open the door and let him sprawl backwards.

From a prone position, he stared up at the tall, flat-faced man who slammed the portal and ducked away. Slugs were hammering at the boards, nearly driving through. The Boquillas cowmen bent to the windows again, hammering back bullet for bullet. The lanky stranger leaned back against the adobe wall, a rueful grin resting on his lips.

"So he double-crossed you like he did us!" he grunted.

Luff Sterrett bent down to help Mike to his feet. "The dirty son of a sheep!" he muttered. "We'll know where to throw our guns from here on. Mike, shake hands with Cort Jerome. He'll tell you the straight of it!"

Mike's glance appraised the BCA leader as they acknowledged the introduction. Jerome had hard lips that seldom smiled, hard eyes that never did. His face was as cold as a rattlesnake's eye. But he had a square jaw and prominent chin, a gaze at once fearless and accusing; Mike liked those characteristics in a man.

Jerome signalled to an undersized, black-haired man with a grimy face and unshaven jaws. "Get a rifle for this gent, Kiowa," he grunted. "Then go back to the store-room like I told you. Reckon you'll be joining us?" he glanced at Mike.

For a moment Mike was thinking of a pair of smoky-gray eyes that did not quite hide their fear, a slim body not made for 30.30 slugs to tear. But Old Stony had to be gentled; if it meant risk to his daughter, that was his concern.

"Give me the gun," he grunted. "What's your side of this ruckus, Jerome? I hear from Barrows he's offered water and hay to everybody that'll break with you? How come these others are still siding you?"

Jerome's yellowish eyes flicked to the cattlemen and punchers bent beneath the windows. "Try and make these boys quit me!" he boasted. "They're square, that's what. We're all in this together till the last gun cracks. Ain't that right, Hardesty?"

Matt Hardesty, middle-aged, sober-eyed Box H owner, glanced aside at Jerome. There was a red groove over his right ear where a bullet had narrowly missed its mark. Hardesty touched his lips with his tongue. Resentment flared for a moment in his features. Then he muttered: "That's right."

The unconvincing tone of his testimonial narrowed Mike's eyes. But at that moment a bullet roared through the panels of the door and sent the three of them scattering. Old Stony's forty-five-ninety was barking again!

Mike's big body hit the floor in a flat dive that piled him against the base of the wall beside Matt Hardesty. Cort Jerome was swearing as he levered a cartridge into the breech of his rifle.

"We'll pull his cork for good, this time!" he snarled. "He's tromped on this range long enough, but by hell that's done!"

FOR FIVE minutes the firing was fierce. The shutters of the Big Store became ragged splintered things. Night had all but claimed the town, and the gunmen had only gun-flashes to aim at.

Lead pounded incessantly against the thick sills of the Land Office windows, ripped through torn shutters to slash at the ponderous volumes shelved against the rear wall.

Suddenly Matt Hardesty gasped and dropped his gun. A swift glance showed Mike that a bullet had tallied him through the hand. He was sucking at the wound, spitting out blood and burned powder-grime. The ranger slipped to his side.

"That blood's got to be stopped," he muttered. Hardesty gratefully let him bind a neckerchief about his wrist and cut off the flow of blood, using a pistol barrel as the other half of the tourniquet. While the lawman worked on him, he swore through clenched teeth.

"Don't know how in hell we got into this! All we ever asked was feed and water, and we could have had that two hours ago for the takin'!"

Suspicion burned in the ranger's face. "Thought you were all for one and one for all," he egged Hardesty on.

The rancher's glance went furtively to where Jerome triggered and levered steadily.

"I'm payin' fifty a month to Jerome's BCA, and all I've ever got out of it is a busted hand, a slug through the short hairs, and a lot of rustled cattle. Begins to look like we're fightin' somebody else's scrap. We joined up because the idea of a united Boquillas Valley sounded good. Reckon there ain't nothing very united about things as they stand."

He tested the wounded hand and found he could use it to some extent. Disconsolately he took up his hot .30-30 and lifted a shell into the chamber.

"But it's too late to quit now," he grunted, squinting along the barrel. "Barrows has always been square enough, but when he bushwhacked Hank Tyler from the Big Store this afternoon, he bought himself a war!"

The rifle flamed, jarred against his

shoulder. Mike Hendan frowned, and his hard palm reflectively rubbed at the stock of his weapon. The rancher's mournful regrets opened a new avenue of speculation.

Where Old Stony Barrows had appeared the mad dog of the town, it now occurred to Mike that Cort Jerome had his own private axes to grind, and was using innocent fools to turn the stone. But no amount of whitewash spilled on the Arrow B boss could blot out the damning brand of bushwhacker. Tyler, the dead puncher in the street, testified to Barrows' brand of war-making; Mike's own narrow escape was further evidence.

Kiowa Holdridge, the rabid-looking little gunman who was Jerome's right-hand man, suddenly came hurrying in from a back room of the office. Under his arm he carried an important looking bundle.

"Boss!" he jerked. "It was there, just like you said. Ten sticks! Enough to blow the Big Store down to a pile of kindling!"

Cort Jerome bounced to his feet and grabbed the little package of dynamite from the weasel-faced lieutenant's hands. His thin lips slitted back. "Fuse?"

Kiowa produced a length of black and white fusing. A pulse began to thrum in Mike Hendan's throat. Jerome thrust the fuse inside one of the sticks.

Then he gave it hurriedly back into Kiowa's hands. "Take it upstairs. You can pitch it through one of the windows of the store from there, or at least onto the roof. Old Stony's going to learn about war from us!"

CHAPTER THREE

Manhunt in Hell

THE RANGER leapt up, fury striking sparks from his eyes. "Hold it!" Mike cracked out. Jerome shot him a de-

manding look, and Mike crossed to him. "What kind of a wild-eyed hellion are you? There's a woman in that store!"

Jerome's eyes showed that he had not forgotten about Kathleen. They were pitiless, the eyes of a man who batters on vengeance-blood.

"You want to sit around and take snapshots at that gang for a week?" he retorted. "Old Stony's got a well in the back of his place and all the food they could eat in a year. Sure I remember the girl! Flesh of the he-wolf's flesh; a high-stepping, hip-swinging hussy that'd grind us all under her heel if she could. She'll go down with the rest!"

Mike had an itch to smash a fist into Jerome's sneering mouth. But he reminded himself that they were supposed to be fighting in the same trench.

"We'll take them one by one," he said harshly. "If we're forced to, we'll find a way to set fire to the Big Store and drive them out. But I've got a hunch Old Stony thinks enough of that girl that by tomorrow night he'll surrender for her sake."

Jerome glanced sharply at Kiowa. "I wish I had that hunch, but I haven't. It's plain to me that this is the only way of stopping Barrows and possibly saving the lives of my own men. But—you're the law, mister. Put it away, Kiowa."

There was something unconvincing in his easy surrender. Frowning, Mike watched him return to his window. Finally he went back to his own post. Then he was pivoting, as a scuffle sounded sharply.

He was in time to see Kiowa Holdridge stagger against the bannister of the stairs and go down. Luff Sterrett stood over him with his Colt gripped in his right hand. There was a blue welt behind the gunman's ear where the ranger had buffaloeed him.

Luff was white and angry. "He was on his way up!" he explained hotly to Mike. "I had to clip the dirty little coyote!"

"Good work, kid!" Mike grunted. He faced the BCA leader, silent and hot-eyed: "Your idea, Jerome?"

"Of course not! Kiowa always was short on judgment. You heard me tell him."

There was a yell from the street, and all the men spun to the windows. From Marquis' Emporium, next door, men were pouring into the road. Mike caught his breath, but no shots came from the Big Store. A man lurched against the door of the Land Office and began to pound and shout.

"Old Stony's pulled out! Him and the whole gang just fogged it into the bosky. Limp Farrell seen 'em leaving the feed barn!"

THERE was a rush for the street. Everyone was running toward the livery stable, where all the BCA horses were ready saddled. But Cort Jerome hung hesitant on the sidewalk beside Mike Hendan.

"It ain't possible they got away!" he protested. "Barrows' mercantile and feed bar are right next door to each other, but they're not connected. We had 'em bottled up tight. I'm having me a look into this."

Mike legged it across the street with him. They tore a ragged shutter away and crawled into the dark store. Cautiously they lit matches and searched the gloomy interior with quick, eager glances. Then they saw it. A ragged hole in the adobe wall, picks and crowbars lying below it in a litter of broken mud bricks.

"Limp was right," Jerome ground out. "But we'll have our hemp around their necks before this night's done!"

Outside, horses reared and whinnied. Fifteen Boquillas cowmen were a-saddle and shouting for Jerome to join them. The combine boss ran out, Mike following to search out Luff and his own steeldust bronc.

Spurs rolled, and the vengeful posse sped through the night. In the bosque they picked up the fugitives' trail. They shot ahead, cutting across the broad, green upsweep of Boquillas Valley, mounting by irregular steps to the base of the barren Hatchet Hills. For some reason, Old Stony had not gone on across the river into Mexico, but had doubled back into the range he knew so well.

Luff Sterrett, young and still un-ried in a manhunt, was in the front rank of riders, plainly infected with the heat of the chase. Mike rode at his side, and doubt went with him. The feeling persisted that this whole feud was a pattern of treachery and murder, with neither side more in the right than the other.

In the loose rubble at the base of the Hatchets, the trail flickered out. An hour passed while the searchers moved with greasewood torches over the loose, broken rock, keening for sign. Across the valley, to the southwest, lay the river; beyond that, the vast deserts of Mañana Land. Over the Hatchets from them, Hell's Lower Forty crawled away, a wilderness of tumbled volcanic rock, drifting red sand, and black lava towers that lifted gauntly into the blistering desert wind.

But in the talus they found no indication of which way Old Stony had taken his wild crew. Finally Jerome gave the order to remount.

"We're wastin' time," he fumed. "We'll head toward El Paso. If he'd been Mexico bound, he wouldn't have doubled back on himself right off. The desert scared him, and for the same reason I figure he won't cross the hills and try to get through Hell's Lower Forty to Saltillo. We'll find him somewhere along the El Paso road."

Again the music of snorting horses and creaking leather. Jerome paused with arm upraised, to stare at Mike Hendan, who sat his saddle frowningly.

"Well, you coming along or ain't you?"

Mike shook his head. "You've got

yourself all tangled up in a blind alley, with your fancy figgering. Old Stony tricked you by pretending to start into Mexico and cutting back. He knew you'd think he was afraid of the dry scrape after that. I've seen that stunt worked before, and always I found my man holed up in the nearest malpais. I'm heading into Hell's Lower Forty."

Derision had its way with Jerome's mouth. "To hell with that! All you'll find out there is a grave. Come on, men!" His arm stabbed aloft again.

Mike and Luff watched the posse roar down the slope, the shadows flowing in after them. Scorn flickered over the lips of Mike Hendan, and his shoulders hunched under the old gray shirt that had flapped in the wind of more manhunts than Cort Jerome had teeth.

He turned finally to Luff. Once again he was bitterly regretting the youth and inexperience of his partner.

"Here's where our trails fork," he muttered. "Ain't nothing two men can do over that hill that one man can't. Go back to Brasada and telegraph McNelly."

Luff was shaking his head, his boyish grin all over his face. "No, you don't, you old horned toad. I'm riding with you." He rowelled his pony and started up the arroyo that led to the pass.

"Now, wait a minute, kid!" Mike went spurring after him. "That's a plumb tough trail over in the sinks. It's bad enough when there ain't eight gunmen sifitin' around among the rocks, but the way it is—"

"Then you admit your reason for sending me back wasn't to wire McNelly!" Luff grinned. "Cripes, Mike, I'd be sixteen kinds of skunk to pull out on you now! Let's fill our canteens at that spring yonder and raise dust."

Mike gave it up. They drank their fill of the sickly, moss-grown spring, filled canteens and canvas water bags, and hurried on.

TOPPING the Hatchet Hills, they had a moon-flooded view of Hell's Lower Forty. Even now, at nearly midnight, sulphurous heat waves beat up from the sun-blistered rocks. Desolation had laid its hand north, south, and east. Miniature deserts of scarlet sand lay pooled among towering dark crags. In the eerie half-light, it was like looking at a graveyard of tottering headboards, monuments to the men who had started across the sinks and never gotten through.

With a sigh for the rangeland they were leaving behind, they pushed down a rocky canyon into the badlands.

From time to time during the wearing hours after they won the malpais, they dismounted and examined the rough lava by matchlight. But the hours tolled by and they discovered nothing. The moon was wearing towards the hills at their back when Luff sprang down and bent over something in the trail.

"Shoe-marks!" he pointed out eagerly, indicating where a steel-shod hoof had scraped a rock, leaving a bright flash of metal.

Mike shook his head. "Might be a week old. We'll have to find better than that."

Again they shoved on. The moon went down like an old silver coin, and along the eastern horizon grew a line of dull gray that merged rapidly into blood red. The horses were stumbling with weariness. There was not a blade of grass, not a puddle of water, to feed them or slake their thirst. Mike called a halt.

He poured some of their priceless water into his Stetson and let his bronc drink. Luff dismounted to do the same. With canteen gurgling, he froze.

"Mike!" The syllable came like a pistol shot. "Yonder—up that barranca—!"

Mike's eyes lifted to probe the gloom filling the mouth of a jagged-walled arroyo. In a flash he saw it—a cigarette butt lying on the rocks—tip glowing!

The ranger's guns lifted clean of holsters. Luff watched him, frozen by the realization that even now renegade guns might be sighting on their backs. Mike's eyes ached with trying to pierce the darkness. Along the barranca his gaze quested, up the sheer cliffs and then around the rim until he was staring down their back trail. But nothing rewarded his searching eyes. And over all, silence lay brooding and sullen.

Mike gestured at Luff. They grounded the horses and stepped cautiously ahead, Colts jutting before them.

It was as they entered the arroyo that a harsh voice behind them warned: "*Ele-vate, hombres!*"

CHAPTER FOUR

Death in the Crag

TWO gloom-cloaked figures came sliding down the rocks. Mike let his guns drop and slowly lifted his hands. Out of the corner of his mouth he gritted: "Easy, kid. They'll probably take our artillery and turn us loose."

Luff made no answer. Scared stiff, Mike told himself, and knew relief at the thought. A false move now would be just

too bad. . . He turned to face the approaching gunmen. In the same moment he heard swift movement at his side.

Even as his eyes were darting to where Luff was recklessly springing to the shelter of a boulder, one of the renegades bawled over weaving gun-barrels: "Don't try it, mister!"

But Luff tried it, despite Mike's own warning shout. His Colts semaphored up, in unison. Unfired, they tumbled from his fingers, while the barranca rolled and echoed to the thunder of bellowing six-guns. Both of the renegades had shot simultaneously. Luff Sterrett, with the ghost of a grin on his face and a brand-new badge on his vest, went down like a garment falling from a hook.

Mike groaned. His haggard eyes flinched as the boy's face smashed against a rock. He turned slowly. Rust, the Arrow B foreman, strode up to frisk him for hidden weapons. Bitterness flooded Mike's soul.

Rust's thin, cold features warmed to a crooked smile.

"Too bad about the kid, Hendan," he said easily. "But you know how it is—he made his play and we had to match it."

"You damned, fish-eyed coyote!" Mike

**Private Notes
from Mrs. M--'s
Diary**



1 Suffered all day with a terrible headache. Felt dull, tired and out of sorts. Remembered that I needed a laxative and decided my headache was due to that.



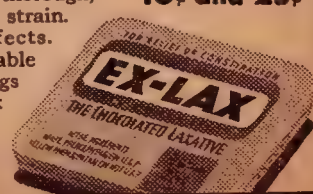
2 Took an Ex-Lax tablet before going to bed. It tasted swell — just like a piece of fine chocolate.

The action of Ex-Lax is thorough, yet gentle! No shock. No strain. No weakening after-effects. Just an easy, comfortable bowel movement that brings blessed relief. Try Ex-Lax next time you need a laxative. It's good for every member of the family.



3 Slept like a top all night. Ex-Lax worked fine this morning and didn't upset me a bit. Headache's all gone now and I feel bright as a lark.

10¢ and 25¢



choked. "Sure I know how it is! And I know how it'll be if I ever get a gun in my hand and you're within a mile!"

Rust's gun lashed out and the barrel caved in Mike's hat. His skull pounding, the ranger slipped to his knees. The world was a swimming, cavorting thing that danced about him. Then his senses levelled and he saw Rust standing back beside his horse.

"Get the law's bronc, Pacheco," the ramrod murmured.

A tall mustached Mexican sauntered over and picked up the trailing reins of the steeldust. He brought the horse and Mike climbed into the saddle. Pacheco went over and began to chuckle as he looked down at Luff's body.

He plucked the boy's shiny badge from the denim shirt, exposing a faint star of unfaded cloth beneath, like a ghost of the things Luff had held dear to his heart.

"How you like a fine belt buckle from this, Señor Rust? he grinned.

Barrows' foreman shook his head. "Not me, *caballero!* Give it to one of your *primos* across the river, That thing's dynamite now!"

Pacheco tossed it up and caught it with a brown hand. "*Si!*" he laughed. Is fair enough, no? I take it from one fool '*chacho* to give to another!"

They started up the dry bed of the ancient lava flow, Pacheco riding first, Mike in the middle, Rust last.

Grief and hatred burned through Mike. God! he thought. If he'd only *made* the kid go back! But Luff was dead, food for carrion-pickers in a few hours. Mike made himself an oath that if he ever crawled out of the sinks alive he'd see every member of Old Stony Barrows' gang in hell, if he had to kill them personally to do it. . . .

THE RED sun shot up from behind the broken lava hills. Invisible flames scorched the malpais. The porous black

and red rocks seemed to soak up the heat like Indian cooking stones. Mike, dizzy and sick from the blow over the head, was rendered weaker by the mounting temperature.

For an hour they held on through the zig-zagging canyon. Then Pacheco wheeled his horse into a smaller arroyo and the way tipped sharply up. They came out on a ledge and began to climb the side of a bench that rose from the badlands like a butte. Now, abruptly, they rounded a humping shoulder of rock and descended into a bowl-like depression pitted with natural tanks. Mike's clearing gaze pinched on the forms of men hurrying up to them. Horses, piles of soogans, and saddle gear littered the camp.

Pacheco and Rust dismounted and hauled him from the saddle. Old Stony Barrows marched up, grizzled beard struck with red shafts from the sun, tawny eyes glowing with the same light. His buckskin shirt was pulled open across the chest. Kathleen left a small, smokeless cook-fire to join them.

"Where's the other one?" Old Stony scowled.

Pacheco and Rust swapped glances. "Kinda tough about him," Rust said, shifting his feet. "He threw down on us and we—we had to plug him."

"You killed that kid?" the trader echoed incredulously, his brows drawing into shaggy knots.

"Hell, we didn't have no choice!" Rust whined.

Old Stony's fist came down like a single-jack sledge. The cartilage in the foreman's nose snapped and blood spurted. Rust groaned and went down, covering his smashed and bleeding face with his hands.

The Arrow B boss towered over the fallen man, his features distorted with fury. "I don't know why I don't kill you!" he hissed. "You opened fire on Hendan last night and drew the law down

on me. Now you've killed his partner. . . Good God, this means the owlhoot for us from here on out!"

Old Stony suddenly trembled and drew his gun from its holster. With a little cry, Kathleen threw herself between the men, clutching at her father's hand.

"Dad!" she cried. "Don't—it's gone far enough now!"

His eyes turned on her as if she were a stranger; Old Stony shook himself. Then his shoulders wilted, and he jammed the gun back into leather.

"All right, honey," he muttered. Then he turned to Pacheco. "Get yourself some grub, and take this gent back where you found him and turn him loose. Reckon he can find his way from there."

He dug a pint flask of brandy from his pocket and handed it to Mike. "Have a pull at this and get that green look off your face. Better keep it. You'll be needin' it before you reach Brasada."

Mike gratefully swallowed some of the liquor. It cleared his head, sent new strength through his veins. Pacheco wandered away to the cook fire. Rust had got to his feet and stalked off, wiping blood from his broken nose and swearing under his breath.

OLD STONY left Mike standing there, and the others went with him. Mike caught an eager breath. But though horses were within reach, three guards sat on the crags above him, watching every move he made.

Then he heard a small voice close by and turned to discover that Kathleen was still beside him. He started to walk off, but she gripped his arm.

"Please! I know what you think of us," she pleaded. "But you don't realize that we—"

Mike gave her a stony, bitter glance. "Maybe you're the one who doesn't savvy things," he cut in. "If I had a gun maybe I could show you. I'd cut down that low-

grade cull you've got for a father right before your eyes. And I'd see the rest of this outfit in hell with him!"

Kathleen shook her head, unshed tears shining in her eyes. Dawn was behind her, heightening the color in her face and hair. But Mike had no eyes for beauty.

"But you're wrong in blaming Dad for what's happened," she protested. "He gave orders to Rust and the Mexican to disarm you and Luff Sterrett and send you back. You saw how angry he was when he learned about your partner."

"Why shouldn't he be sore? It'll mean bucking the whole state of Texas when word gets out. Put your money behind the chip that says it's his own hide he's mourning about—not Luff Sterrett's."

"No, Mike, it's not that. If you only knew Dad better—! Not as a hard-fisted range czar, but as a common, square-shooting cowman. He was heart-sick when this trouble started. None of those two-bit ranchers have ever had anything against him before. He's carried some of their accounts for a year. He'd have kept on carrying them, if they hadn't sided against him."

"Tell me this," Mike said. "If your old man's the Santa Claus of the Big Bend, why did he open fire on the Boquillas men yesterday? That puncher went down with a slug in his back and his guns in their holsters. It takes skunk blood to pull a cut-band thing like that."

Kathleen did not answer immediately. She glanced around until she saw that Rust was well out of hearing. Then she said tensely: "You're right, Mike. And I'm beginning to think we've got more than one cut-bank killer in this outfit! Dad knew there was war coming, and he kept the store closed all day and the shutters barred for trouble. But he didn't kill Hank Tyler. Rust shot him in the back, just as you said. He told my father that Tyler drew on him. I think Dad doubted him right then, but he was afraid—"

"Afraid?" Mike repeated, a mocking smile tugging at his lips.

"Afraid for me, probably."

Kathleen indicated the punchers around the camp fire with a scornful gesture. "These aren't our regular punchers. Jerome bribed our men to quit weeks ago. These are just the men we could scrape up on short notice. Yesterday, when they began to shoot loose and do just about as they pleased, we realized Jerome had got next to them, too! He paid them to make trouble. After the fight started, there wasn't much Dad could do. If he challenged them, they'd have turned on us, killed us both, and made their getaway. We've kept them from starting anything by promising them each a thousand dollars when we reach the hideout. But . . . I don't know"

MIKE suddenly realized he had been listening open-mouthed. Swallowing hook, line, and sinker the fantastic yarn she was spinning at Old Stony's bidding! With a short laugh he raised the brandy to his lips again.

"Lady, you tell 'em tall and wild!" he marvelled. "For a minute there I forgot my pardner had just been killed by Old Stony's men and that I'm waiting to be freighted off to a bushwhack grave myself! So you'll excuse me if I fail to shed a tear for the tough spot you're in!"

When he had drunk deep and lowered the bottle, he looked down again into her stormy eyes. With a choked little sound she turned and left him.

Pacheco had finished his hurried breakfast and now was sauntering back, his big jingling Mexican spurs flashing, his tight *chaparejos* outlining long, slightly bowed legs. He was smoking a black-paper cigarette as he retrieved Mike's pony and handed him the reins. His coffee colored face was bland.

"'Sta 'ueno, my frien'," he smiled. "We start, no?"

Mike turned his back on him and mounted. Side by side they rode around the little tanks of stagnant rain water and found their way down the trail. The heat grew increasingly oppressive as they proceeded. Layers of molten glass seemed to shimmer over Hell's Lower Forty. The perspiration was drawn from the men's pores as if by suction, and after they ceased to sweat the heat became still more suffocating.

Now they were in the barranca again, scuffing laboriously over the rough floor. Pacheco still rode along beside the ranger, now puffing contentedly on the quirly, now whistling discordantly. Mike pulled in a little closer, measuring the distance between them shrewdly.

Pacheco began to laugh. "Ah, no, *compañero!* You could never make it. But to save us both unpleasantness—"

He pulled the bit against the back of his pinto's mouth and the horse fell behind. Mike sighed. Wearily he slumped along.

A shadow flitted over the sun, then another, and another. Mike's gaze flashed up. Buzzards!

Pacheco scowled at them. A superstitious man, his soul grew troubled at the sight of these patrons of death. He stopped his horse.

"I think this will do," he announced curtly. "You will dismount, señor, and turn around."

Mike swung down, looked back at the Mexican quizzically. Pacheco's mouth had undergone an unpleasant change. He moved his horse closer to the other. Then his right hand came up with a gun gripped in it.

"Do you pray, señor?"

"What's the idea?" Mike affected shocked surprise. "Barrows said you were to turn me loose."

"Barrows! Bah! That old fool!" The imprecations tumbled rapid-fire from Pacheco's lips. "I do not take orders

from heem. And I say you are to join your poor friend *muy pronto!*"

Mike's broad, brown face showed a sort of naive curiosity. His big shoulders leaned a little nearer.

"And who do you take orders from, partner?" he inquired.

Pacheco's mouth found a smile again. "Amigo, you meet death like wan brave. . . . *Sacramento!*" His voice hit a shrill pitch as the ranger sprang.

CHAPTER FIVE

Gun-Ghosts' Brigade

A BLAST of wind snapped Mike Handen's ear as the slug *whoomed* past. Gunflame seared his shirt. Somehow his fingers tangled with the yellow silk kerchief around Pacheco's neck and he yanked the lean renegade from the saddle.

Pacheco fought like a barrel of wild-

cats, slugging, clawing, whining curses. Three times his gun-hammer rose and fell. The slugs ripped at Mike's shirt and pants, screamed by him to whine off the rocks with banshee wails. The ranger got his fingers on the hot pistol barrel and yanked, throwing a long right into Pacheco's face in the same blur of movement.

The Mexican went back into the wall, eyes filming. Almost instantly he was clawing for his other Colt.

Mike shot him down as he might have assassinated a mad dog. Legs braced wide, gun close to his hip, he fired until the firing pin punched empty shells. Pacheco rocked like a sapling uprooted. Blood bubbled from his heart in rhythmic life-spilling jets. Then the strength slipped from him and he went down.

Mike blew the smoke from the barrel of his gun. After a moment, his nerves steady as a balanced rock, he bent down

Men with tough beards—tender skin!
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and removed the gunman's belts and holsters. He strapped them on, filled the empty gun, whistled for his horse.

The steeldust was not long in coming, though Pacheco's pinto had careened off into the maze of tumbled monuments and lost itself. Mike rose to the saddle and took another pull at the brandy. Then he washed it down with gulps of water from the canteen.

There was one thing that had to be done, above all, and that was to cover Luff's body with rocks to protect it from the buzzards. While he rode he pondered, the sun beating down on him with cruel hammer strokes. Mike was as hungry as a bear. He reckoned he had only enough water for five or six hours, with the horse needing it worse than he did in this scarlet hell. With the shrewdness of a gambler, he counted his chances of pursuing Old Stony and the seven men with him and coming back alive.

It was the Winchester under his leg that decided him. In these devil's mazes, a man could play a game of hide and seek for hours without being caught by his pursuers. He might even be able to cut most of them down from a long distance before he pulled out! His decision made, he hurried on to take care of his grisly chore before turning back.

The sun had notched still higher into the brassy heavens when he slowed his bronc to a walk in the vicinity of the hideout atop the bench. Leaving the steeldust behind an outcrop of black basalt, he crept up the trail. But as he had expected, the tanks were deserted.

Mike took time to fill his canteens and drink deep of the foul-smelling water before he hurried on. Regaining the main trail, he followed the bright marks left by shod hooves. He was surprised to find splatterings of blood among them. Puzzled, faintly worried, he pressed on across the rocky gridiron.

Within the first mile he saw the rocks

melt into sand. The sticky drops stood out sharply against it. With his eyes on the blood marks, he loped his horse around a sandy turn and almost ran over a crawling figure in the middle of the trail.

Mike's guns sprang into his hands even as he knew the man was Old Stony Barrows. Barrows heard him and he tried to get to his feet. But his legs caved under him and he fell flat. There was something convincing about the scene that dissipated Mike's suspicions.

He leaped down, grabbing his canteen from the saddle horn. Old Stony seized the container and drank noisily. The ranger's eyes narrowed on the wound in his shoulder. Brown stains nearly covered the front of his shirt, and his head was matted with gore from other wounds.

Then the old trader staggered to his feet, eyes wild with terror. "They've got her, the dirty sons!" he choked.

Alien emotions clamored for precedence in Mike's brain. Hatred was gradually being driven out by a dull fear. "What's happened?" he demanded.

BARROWS' eyes were like two windows of hell. "Rust plugged me from the back. Then they slugged me and left me for dead. They've taken Kathleen with them to the hideout. God knows what's— We've got to stop them, Hendan!"

Mike's jaw set and he forced him back down on the ground. All the things the girl had told him suddenly shone in his mind as truth. He was seeing Old Stony for the first time. Not as a range bully, but as a stout-hearted, rather tired old man who lived by an honest man's code.

"Have a shot of your own likker," he invited Barrows. He took the bottle from him when he had finished and used what was left to sterilize the wound. It was a clean one, the slug having gone clear through.

Old Stony seemed to come to his senses after that. He sat on the sand and breathed deeply, frowning into the heat-haze. "Hideout's a good ten miles," he muttered. "Take us all day with one hoss. You—you're coming along?"

"You couldn't stop me!" Mike grinned. "Which way, partner?"

"The spot lies northeast. We'll know it by a black spire. But it'll mean root hog or die when we reach it. God knows how many of the varmints are there!"

With Old Stony in the saddle and Mike walking, they set out. Anxiety for the girl carried them along swiftly during that first hour. In any other situation, Mike might have been startled at the depth of his feelings toward her. But now he was conscious only of a burning terror that she might come to harm before they got to the hideout.

The long, parching hours crawled by like ants. The aging trader suffered terribly from the heat and his wounds. Above his beard, his face was the color of a tallow candle. Twice Mike had to spring to his side as he began to topple off the horse. After the second time, he made him lie down in a spot of shade for five minutes. Then he roped him to the saddle and they stumbled on.

The sun reached its terrible zenith. Hell's Lower Forty was a glowing furnace. It was a crematorium that would sooner or later reduce to cracklings every living thing exposed to its cauterizing heat. Pressure, cruel and suffocating, closed in on men and horse. Old Stony began talking out of his head, rambling on as if he were talking to his wife.

Two o'clock came, three o'clock, four; still the heat blazed and the miles inched past maddently slow. In his ever briefer intervals of coherence, Old Stony lifted his shaggy head and searched the horizon for the black steeple. And now it was growing dusk over the badlands; and the spire had not been sighted.

Desperation claimed them, bringing a dullness to their minds, so that when the horse suddenly shivered and went down, they hardly realized that it meant death was within hours of them as well.

Mike cut Old Stony loose from the dead pony. The trader held onto him as he stood up. Suddenly his eyes raised over the jagged boulders surrounding them. A hoarse cry tore from his throat.

"Yonder!" he croaked, pointing with a shaking finger.

Mike's bleary gaze widened. Then he went stiff. "The steeple. It—it ain't over a mile away!"

Old Stony began reeling towards the black lava finger that crooked up from the jumbled malpais. "Might as well be a hundred," he groaned. "Our legs ain't got the stuff to carry us—"

"No?" Mike grabbed at his words like a challenge. "Then by hell we'll finish crawling on our bellies!"

A SULPHUROUS sort of coolness existed in Old Stony's hideout beneath the steeple. From the base of the towering crag a great shelf thrust itself out to cast a dark patch of shade on the sand. Cold spring water bubbled from a hole in the black lava rock, to be swallowed up as soon as it hit the sand.

Darkness was flooding the sky. A tiny fire, no larger than was necessary to heat coffee and fry salt pork and *chilis refritos*, thrust the shadows back.

Kathleen Barrows huddled against the rocks, her eyes on the six men wolfing their grub in a circle on the sand. Her face wore the marks of grief and despair, but her eyes were dry. Cort Jerome was there, and Kiowa, his rabid little lieutenant. The pair had curved into the badlands by the north trail only a short time before.

"I got to laugh," Kiowa chuckled, "everytime I think of Matt Hardesty and the posse beatin' the brush thirty miles up

the river! We told them to follow the bosky another fifteen miles before they gave up. By the time they get back we'll have everything under control."

Jerome glanced up with his tawny eyes. "Pacheco ought to be here pretty soon."

Rust shook his head. "The Mex won't be comin' back tonight. I told him to rack into Brasada after he finished the ranger and get hold of your lawyer. Barrows won't be needing that land any longer, and it won't hurt to file on it pronto."

"Good!" Jerome's big, long, calloused hands rubbed at his thighs, and he smiled.

Apprehensively, Rust glanced over his shoulder, at the girl. "How about her? We can't sell her out of the way."

"Can't we?" It had taken years of hating to put into Jerome's eyes the savage ferocity that crouched there now. "There's places in Chihuahua that pay good money for her kind. We won't have to worry no more about her."

The others looked a little shocked. The renegade leader laughed at them.

"Leave that to me," he reassured them. "It's been a long, waiting game you boys have played with me, but it's all over now. And I'll remember you when the long green starts rolling in."

Rust and Kiowa and the other three began to grin—an expression that froze on their lips as a voice drawled from beyond the firelight:

"How about us, Jerome—going to remember us, too?"

Out of the gray shadows stalked two men from hell—two men whom Jerome had sent there. But they were here now, and the guns in their hands had begun to bellow!

The outlaws spilled this way and that, scattering as they swung their artillery into the fight. But panic jerked at their raw nerves. Mike and Old Stony stood tall before their whining lead, seemingly as hard to hit as dust devils.

Rust suddenly threw up his hands and began to plead for his life. If Barrows heard the whining voice, he ignored it. He sent a shot into the foreman's belly.

Cort Jerome bounced to his feet. He sprang for the shadows of the rocks, slapping a shot back over his shoulder.

Mike felt the slug crease his ribs, knocking the wind out of him. Tightening his grip on the forty-five, he thumbed a shot after the renegade. Jerome cried out and grabbed at his shoulder. Mike slammed another shot into his body. . . .

After that it was a case of tromping snakes before they could make to shelter. Mike and the old trader waded in, firing until their guns were silent. And when that time came there were only the two of them and Kathleen left alive. . . .

LATER that night, when Old Stony had dropped into a deep and restorative sleep, Mike saw to making Kathleen comfortable on a couple of blankets.

"I don't need to tell you, that I'm sorry for everything that's happened," the girl murmured. "You've gone through the fires of hell for Dad and me."

Mike shook his head. "There's only one thing I regret, and that's that I couldn't save Luff. This is going to hit Captain McNelly pretty hard, losing two men sudden-like."

"Two—?" Kathleen frowned at him.

Mike could rope and ride and shoot, but he wasn't worth a damn where making love was concerned.

"Sure—I'm through rangerin'. I'm going to hock my star, buy a piggin' string, and take up ranching. And I—I was thinking that if you ever get away from the store, why—maybe we could ride out together and look over the land I'm going to buy. I'd sorta like your okay on it, being as you're going to spend quite a heap of time out there—"

Cavvy Tender's Glory Road

By ROLLAND LYNCH



A buckskin-clad figure . . . gaunt from privation and hardship. . . .

When they caught Storm Rankin running guns to the murderous Shoshones, the shame of his disgrace plunged him to the depths of whiskey-sodden worthlessness. But on that last ride with death, Storm found deep within him the strength to buy powder and lead with his blood, and to give them away . . . in return for his honor!

WHISKEY was plentiful in Saint Joe where the wagon men made up the trains for the long trek west, but Storm Rankin was cutting heavily into the supply. He sat in a remote corner of Barney White's Missouri Bar, bleary eyes bent on the glass before him.

Barney White, at the end of the bar, pointed Storm out to Ringo Whitefeather, a swart Kiowa half breed. "Yes sir," said Barney. "If you're looking for a man cheap, there's Storm Rankin. You heard about him?"

Ringo Whitefeather just lowered the lids over his beady eyes for an answer.

Barney took a drag on his cheroot and

went on. "He'll work cheap; what's left of him. Not much of a man any more. But there was a day when Storm Rankin, Lieutenant Rankin mind you, was the best damn cavvy tender west of the Mississippi. Give him a piece of bailin' wire and a bottle of liniment and he'd keep your stock and wagons rolling clean to Californy."

Ringo Whitefeather nodded, and Barney made no further explanation. Everybody knew the story of Storm Rankin. . . .

It went back five years. Storm was at Fort Blackwell, where he had charge of the fort's rolling stock. He did his job so well that the colonel of the stockade had Congress confer a commission on him: Lieutenant Storm Rankin, cavvy tender.

One day the Indians seemed too quiet, and an investigation was ordered to see what they were up to. That foresight nipped a massacre in the bud. A rifle was found under every Indian blanket and a whole arsenal was found in the livery barn. Storm had the only key to the livery. You had to keep things nailed down or locked up or the Indians would steal them.

Storm swore he knew nothing about the guns. He couldn't be sure but he thought Captain Giles Manders had planted them in the livery. Manders hated Storm because Colonel Mitchell's daughter favored the cavvy tender. Storm was court martialed and sent to the black den on the Humbolt River, the prison for military wrongdoers. They kept him there a year and turned him out, dishonorably discharged.

Storm never got anywhere after that. He returned to Saint Joe and caught on with wagon trains taking the Oregon Trail. He lasted just long enough for the people to hear about his dishonor. The broad-faced mid-westerners didn't want in their trains a man who might sell them out to the Indians as he had done Fort Blackwell. Storm had to kill a man with his bare hands for accusing him of

that; and that was the end. From then on he got jobs swamping out saloons and unloading steam boats with the rest of the town's derelicts.

RINGO WHITEFEATHER slapped a coin down on the bar to pay for his drink and went over to Storm's table. He pulled up a chair and asked, "Weren't you a cavvy tender in the army?"

Storm raised his bleary eyes but said nothing.

"I'm looking for a cavvy tender, a man who can keep the rolling stock in shape across the *Jornada del Muerto*," said Ringo. "You are a cavvy tender?"

Storm fought with his groggy brain then. "Sure," he said, "sure. Commissioned in the army." He raised his right arm. You could still make out the faded commission stripes of his tattered army coat. "I was the best damn man in the army." There was new interest in his eyes and a little life. This might be a chance to trek west to a fresh start. There was land and gold and trapping out there, and nobody cared if you were honorably or dishonorably discharged.

Ringo Whitefeather nodded and jerked his head. Without a word, Storm weaved to his feet and followed the half breed into the sunshine.

With Ringo shouldering a path through the crowd, they went down and jammed aboard the cable ferry that freighted pilgrims and wagons across the Missouri River. Up river they came upon the Whitefeather caravan. Storm braced himself on his unsteady legs and stared.

He had never seen so many dilapidated wagons gathered together in one bunch. Some stood with wheels toed in and others with wheels toed out. Their canvas coverings were gray with rot and filled with holes. Sideboards were weathered and cracked. Grimy tarpaulins covered the freight of those whose bows were bare.

And yonder stood the cavvy, bunched

in a crude rope corral. The horses were in no better shape than the rolling gear. Galled by sores and flies, their heads hung wearily while matted and snarled tails switched listlessly at tormenting insects. In their present condition they couldn't pull their own weight.

A shaggy, buckskin-clad man came out of a tent and stood staring. He came forward at the half breed's nod.

"Storm Rankin, cavvy tender," said Ringo brusquely. "Give him some blankets."

The giant's eyes flickered with recognition and he jerked his head toward the tent. Storm followed him inside. The man pawed two worn blankets off of a pile and turned to stare again at Storm with those icy eyes.

"I'm the wagon master," he finally said. "Bully Vegas." He teetered forward antagonistically on the toes of his scarred boots, his lips thinned defensively against what Storm might show or say. Rankin just reached out and took the blankets.

"You never heard of me?" asked Bully Vegas.

Storm shrugged his shoulders. "Sure, but what's the difference?"

Bully Vegas grabbed Storm's arm. "My train didn't have a chance at a standing fight," he said. "There were a thousand Apaches. It was stand and die, or run and take a chance. I did the best I could—" His fervor ended pathetically.

"Tough luck," said Storm simply. "You were the only one to get out. They should have gotten you, too."

Bully Vegas nodded his shaggy head forlornly. "Should've gotten me too," he mumbled. Then his voice took on a fierce edge. "You might as well know this won't be no *whiskey* trip west. Those wagons out there are loaded with guns for White-feather's people. He's fixing for an uprising. It'll be a one way trail without knowing what'll happen at its end. I tell you this so you can quit now."

Storm remained silent, his foggy brain turning over this knowledge. Running guns to the Indians! That was the thing they had accused him of doing at Fort Blackwell. It was a little ironic the way things turned out. . . .

A bearded oldster stuck his head into the tent and said, "Another horse just went down. If we don't get 'im up we'll have to pull one of them wagons ourselves."

Bully Vegas looked at Storm. Slowly, Rankin's shoulders straightened. "Might as well howl like a wolf so long as they keep making you out one," he said and turned from the tent.

HE FOLLOWED the grimy oldster to the crude rope corral. It was then he saw the six Indians squatting in the shade over by the river bosque. His eyes stayed on them so long, the oldster—Missouri Coates—said, "Kiowa bucks. Meat fetchers and guards."

Storm turned his attention then to the fallen horse. As he knelt down beside it, his eyes went over the rest. They had been proud animals in their day, as fine a remuda as anyone would have wanted to possess. He stroked the mole-soft nose of the stricken beast.

He saw what was wrong. The tender vascular of the left hind foot had been injured and the heavily taxed remaining legs had given out.

Storm shed his coat and placed it under the nose of the animal so it wouldn't breathe in the fine dust of the ground. He cut away the horn of the hoof with his knife and eased the pressure on the vascular. When he was done, he looked up at Missouri and said, "I'll have to put a corked shoe on this hoof."

Coates chuckled hollowly. "You have to steal everything, including the forge, to do it. Ringo won't buy anything extra."

Storm squatted and pondered that. He couldn't do much with these crowbaits

without materials. Crowbait—that was it. He was crowbait, too. He was old and weathered and spavined before his time just like they were. This thought made a strong bond between him and these suffering things. He rose and went down to the river and got some cool mud. He plastered that in the hoof and tied it in place with strips of his old army coat. When he was done he turned to Missouri again.

"You keep that cloth wet," he ordered. "That mud'll cushion the vascular until it toughens again. If you let it dry out—" He spat on his hands and went to another horse.

Missouri slowly scratched in his beard and then a grin spread beneath it. "I'll be calling him Lootinent next," he chuckled.

STORM became conscious of time only when the sun was gone below the rim of the undulating prairie. He straightened his aching back and flicked whiskey sweat from his forehead. All the galls and sores of his animals had been treated. He had cleaned them of infection, and when the axle grease he had been able to scrape from the wagons was gone, he had used mud to plaster them up. There was a bowed tendon neatly bandaged, a cracked knee stitched tight with coarse thread, manes and tails unsnarled and every animal glistening from the buckets of water he had sloshed over them.

He felt a little weak in the stomach after such hard work and his throat ached for the burn of liquor. At the river's edge with Missouri, he sloshed water over his face and arms and rubbed his hands dry on his grimy trousers.

"Wash up," he said to Coates. "We'll eat now."

Without touching the water, Missouri followed him up the bank, muttering, "I do as the company does."

Storm didn't get that remark until they

came up to the camp's fire. Bully Vegas sat with the six Kiowas about the blaze. One huge kettle hung from the tripod. Storm watched the Indians plunge their hands into the pot and grab chunks of meat. Storm stood there, arms akimbo, while Missouri squirmed into a place about the fire and followed the Indian tactics.

Bully Vegas saw Storm and moved a little. "Place," he mumbled with a full mouth and indicated the ground beside him.

Storm turned stiffly away. He saw the yellow candle shine in Ringo Whitefeather's tent and parted the flap. Ringo was stretched out on a cot and he rose to one elbow.

"I'm not eating out of the same pot with Indians," said Storm bluntly.

The ghost of a smile came to the breed's full lips. "You don't have to."

Storm waited for him to go on, but Ringo had apparently said all he had to say. He rolled off of his elbow and put his hands under his head and stared at the tent ceiling. Storm got it then. If he didn't eat with those men out there, he wouldn't eat at all. With a curse, he let the tent's flaps drop back into place.

He went down and recrossed the river and went to his corner in Barney White's place. He paid for all the drinks he could, then called Barney over. He was feeling pretty warm inside now.

"I want some credit," he told Barney. "Want more to drink."

"You got a job?" asked Barney.

"Did have," said Storm. Then he swore heavily and long.

Barney turned and waved to a giant standing by the bar. The hulking river man came over and looked down at Storm.

"Throw 'im out," said Barney. "I don't want no Injun gun-giver around here no more."

Storm tried to dodge the big hand that reached out for him, but his liquor-numbed reflexes wouldn't work. He felt

himself lifted and heard the swelling laughter as the man trundled him to the door and heaved.

Storm rose painfully to his feet. Women tucked in their flowing skirts as they gave him a wide berth and kept their eyes stonily away from him.

Storm stood there for a moment, a little unsteady, thinking things out. He guessed he had reached the end of the road. No man could sink any lower. Maybe he wasn't good enough to eat with Ringo Whitefeather's Indians. Shoulders hunched, he went down and recrossed the river. At Ringo's camp, he found his two blankets and curled up on the ground.

THE sky was pale with dawn when a soft kick awoke Storm Rankin. The cavvy tender looked up into the leathery face of Bully Vegas.

"We're on our way," said the wagon master.

Storm sat bolt upright. "Those horses aren't in any shape yet—"

Bully shrugged. "Ringo said that was your lookout." He turned away.

Storm got up and folded his blankets and put them in one of the wagons. He joined the group at the fire and wolfed his breakfast. Then he went out and looked over the cavvy. They looked a little better this morning, but it would take time and care to get them into any kind of shape.

The first week's progress was slow. Storm stood up to Ringo Whitefeather when the breed would have driven the animals to exhaustion. He swore and threatened and worked with them, and under the mysterious touch of his hands they began to pick up. He got them so they could make ten miles a day instead of six. The horse with the injured vascular limped but slightly now and the one with the bowed tendon had little difficulty in keeping up with his teammate in the traces.

What he did to the wagons with pieces of bailing wire, old wood and scrap iron was magical. He kept them from falling apart with such ease that Ringo Whitefeather was forced to confess he had never known a cavvy tender who could match Storm Rankin's skill.

To Storm the work was better than any whiskey for burying the past. He found that pride in labor was a terrific thing and could not be denied. He cursed himself for submerging it all these years beneath the stupor of drink. Man had to be doing things, healing with his hands, holding things together by sheer will and a little bailing wire. In that was the only relief from life's cruelties and bad luck. Creation was the answer to the past. . . .

So the freight rolled west. Dodge City. The Cimarron Crossing. The *Jornada del Muerto*—Journeyway of the Dead. When the train at last crawled out on the hellish, trackless strip whose only guides were the polished bones of men and cattle, his remuda and wagons were in shape to make the crossing. The sweat that dampened Storm's forehead now was not from whiskey. It had taken all his will power those first few stations of the Trace, but he had watched them drop behind and not a thimble full of liquor had touched his lips. This was a one way trail for him; and he was going to take it cleanly.

It was on the fifth day, just at camping time, that the bloody apparition came out of the shifting dust whorls of the *Jornada*. A buckskin-clad figure, gaunt from privation and hardship, his tongue swollen and purple from lack of water, his voice a guttural cackle in his throat, collapsed in front of the first wagon. An arrow protruded sickeningly from his side.

Storm, Bully Vegas and Missouri grabbed him and laid him out on a hastily stretched blanket. Ringo Whitefeather looked loftily on while his Indians huddled suspiciously beside him.

Wetting a bandana, Storm let precious

drops of water fall on the man's parched lips. An hour later, the gaunt scout got his voice back and told them what his writhing, horror stricken eyes had tried to convey.

"Kiowa attack—Fort Stockdale," he rasped. "Train of pilgrims and small detachment of troops holding out . . . against thousands. They might all be gone by now. . . . I've looked so long for help—" He broke off to weep wretchedly.

Storm and Bully Vegas looked at one another. Ringo Whitefeather had stepped closer, that ghostly smile turning the corners of his thick lips. His bucks watched him, fiery lights coming into their eyes.

The stricken scout was sobbing on, "Powder and ball in God's name—Women and kids . . ." He could say no more.

Slowly, Storm Rankin straightened from the man's side. There was no hesitation. He had expected a moment such as this, and he was prepared. He turned to face Ringo Whitefeather, hands hanging limp, fists clenched. Bully Vegas straightened, too, standing very close to Storm. Missouri came up on the other side.

There was no need for words. All the fanatical savagery Ringo Whitefeather possessed was in his aquiline features. The uprising had begun and he was here with the necessary materials to continue it. There was murder in his eyes; and in the eyes of his braves. He did not need these three palefaces any longer. He nodded briefly to his men.

STORM was the first to strike. With a wild cry, he pulled his knife and lunged at Ringo. Bellowing, Bully Vegas and Missouri charged the braves.

Ringo caught Storm's thrust with his upraised arm, his own knife flashing aloft. Storm's free hand went up and plucked Ringo's descending wrist and held it. They stood thus, chest to chest, straining to

break each other's hold and plunged down their keen blades.

Suddenly, Storm's knees went out from under him. He looked up and saw Death poised over him. Ringo's arm was coming down, the blade in his hand shining. There was no way to stop it, nothing Storm could do. The sound of a shot laced the stillness.

Storm felt the blade sheer across his collar bone and enter the fleshy muscle of his shoulder. There was no pain in this moment, just the feel of warm blood gushing. He rolled over once more to escape the next thrust and surged to his feet. He stared down at the dead Ringo Whitefeather. Then he slowly turned to the scout. He was on one elbow, a smoking cap and ball pistol in his hand. He sank wearily back on the blanket.

With the pain creeping into his shoulder now, Storm went to Bully Vegas' side. The giant wagon master's lips were blood flecked. The bone handle of a knife protruded from his stomach.

He looked up at Storm and smiled faintly. "I kinda figured you wouldn't let those rifles and powder ever see Kiowa hands," he mumbled thickly. "I was ready to back your play. Get 'em to the fort. . . ."

Storm nodded. "I'll get 'em there."

"An' tell 'em," said Bully, "tell 'em I did the best I could—"

"I'll tell 'em—"

Bully's hand crept painfully to Storm's. "I found some luck," he mumbled. "Yours is still all bad." Then he indicated the knife handle. "Pull it, Rankin—I—I can't do it myself."

For a long moment, Storm looked down at the man. Circumstance and luck certainly had a lot to do with a man's life, he thought as he reached out and jerked the knife free of Bully's stomach.

Then he moved to Missouri's side. He turned away. He could not help the bearded oldster, now. He was dead.

Clapping his hand to his bleeding shoul-

der, Storm went back to the blanket that held the scout.

"I'm leaving you water and grub," he said. "Nurse yourself and when you're able, bury Bully Vegas and Missouri."

The man nodded dully. "Hurry—"

Swiftly, Storm bandaged his wound and got out the water and grub for the scout. Then he was pouring powder and ball onto an already overloaded wagon. When he was done he waved and climbed into the seat. With a shout, he sent the team bellying into the traces.

Wrapping the reins around the whip stock, he fumbled five rifles from a case. Crawling back across the swaying top, he broke open powder and shot and primed the weapons. Then he wedged them against the seat and tied himself down to the wagonette.

THE wild, careening ride through the night left its mark on Storm as he hurtled on through the coming dawn. His mind kept slipping and seeing old pictures he did not want to see. He fought them by grimly clinging to the one thought: that he must run the Kiowa gauntlet at the Fort.

Then he was rounding the talus of a hill. The plain ahead was filled with brown men with feather-tipped lances. With a rebel yell, Storm urged his team to still greater speed and reached for a rifle. The grim log stockade of Fort Stockdale loomed ahead, white cottony puffs floating up from its walls.

In a moment, Storm was in the center of a sea of brown, screaming horsemen.

His avalanching wagon parted them like the waves before a ship. Storm emptied his rifle into the face of a hideously painted brave. He threw the empty rifle at a horseman and grabbed another. He shot the buck who ranged alongside his team and tried to grab their bridles.

The gates of the fort were opening and

blue clad men were running out, kneeling and pouring a salvo of lead into the seething ranks of the Redskins. Like a juggernaut, Storm rolled the wagon into the fort.

As the colonel and his lieutenants ran up, Storm croaked, "Powder and ball for every man." Then he collapsed.

A couple of soldiers cut him down and stretched him out on the ground. A lieutenant came up and looked at him closely. "That's Storm Rankin, or I'm a private," he said. "I served with him up in the Soshone country. Then he was discharged for giving guns to the Indians, but no one who knew him ever believed the charges."

The colonel looked down at Storm's inert body. "Damn my eyes," he said, "I don't believe it either. Not after he drove through that hell to get these guns to us!"

Storm heard those words, but as yet they had no meaning to his pain-wracked mind. "The horses . . ." he muttered.

The lieutenant and the colonel turned to the panting, foam-flecked team. "Look at the condition of those animals," the younger man said proudly. "Lathered to hell, but still able and willing to run!"

"Damn my eyes," said the colonel. "I'll have an investigation into this man's record. I remembering hearing of him. Storm Rankin, only commissioned cavvy tender in the army. Damn, I'll see he gets his commission back. Can't believe a man that did this could have run guns to the Indians." He turned and gave a few terse orders.

"Lieutenant Correll, see that every man has ammunition. We're going to give the Kiowa a taste of his own medicine. Doctor, see that Lieutenant Rankin has the best of care. Bugler, blow assembly!"

Storm Rankin heard the proud, defiant notes of the bugle and smiled. He had at least returned to the life he loved . . . in triumph.

BREED OF COURAGE

By ELI COLTER



*The horse bellowed in fury
and pain. . . .*

Johnny Fields loved that Rambler horse, so when he learned that Dill Gross was coming from prison to kill the big bay, he taught Rambler how to protect himself. He didn't know at the time that he was also buying himself salvation from a blazing trap of flame and death!

JOHNNY FIELDS stared at the big star-faced bay and reached out a hand to run his fingers lingeringly along the shining hide on the horse's shoulder.

Mart Leverage leaped to the ground from his perch on the corral fence, walked over to Johnny and laid a light

touch on his arm. "What's eatin' you, boy?" Mart asked quietly. "You look like you was goin' to be hanged tomorrow."

Johnny's eyes were bleak, and a thin white line showed around the edges of his mouth. "The boss just got word, Mart. Dill Gross is comin' home tomorrow."

Mart whistled under his breath and scowled. "Hell! Well, they ain't nothin' you can do about it, Johnny. Rambler's his horse, and you can't stop him from takin' him."

"Yeah, and what's he gonna do to him when he does take him?" Johnny demanded savagely, his hand still resting on Rambler's glistening shoulder. "Go right on abusin' him the way he always did, the way he's done to every horse he ever owned."

Mart shrugged his helplessness, and his dark face was sober. "Maybe he's reformed, Johnny. You know, when a jasper like him's had a year and a half in jail to think it over, it might teach him somethin'."

"Reformed!" hooted Johnny derisively. "You can't reform a guy like that! All this talk the boss says Gross made to the jailer about learnin' his lesson and never bein' mean to dumb brutes any more is nothin' but talk. He'll come home just as bad as he went. I don't know why the boss told him he could come back to his old job again."

Guy Lander, emerging from the nearby barn door, leading his saddled brown mount, paused a few feet from the two cowboys, his troubled gaze intent on Johnny Fields. "It's fair to give every man a chance, Johnny," he said quietly. "After all, you got to remember that there's some explanation for Dill acting that way. He's never been able to forget that time he got in the way of a runaway team. Besides getting his leg broke, he was scared out of a couple of years'

growth, and he's been terrified of horses ever since. And when he gets scared of a horse, he takes it out the wrong way—on the animal instead of on himself. But we got to wait and see if maybe he's changed."

Johnny snorted. "Ain't a cowhand living that ain't been banged up plenty by a horse one time or another. And there ain't a horse living that's deliberately mean once you try to understand him. But you think Dill would ever try to get to understanding a horse? You think maybe he ain't gonna come back meaner than ever after bein' in jail, and try and take it out on Rambler?"

Lander stood silent for an instant, his troubled eyes going from Johnny to Mart Leverage.

"Well, he won't get far," Johnny predicted with grim assurance. "I learned Rambler to protect himself. All this time I been workin' on him, I been thinkin' of the time Dill would git outa jail and come back. It's sure gonna be a sorry day for him first time he tries to beat up on that baby."

Lander's eyes narrowed. "You learned him to protect himself? What the hell are you talkin' about?"

"JUST watch, and I'll show you."

Johnny's mouth was tight-set again, and the little white line had appeared again around the edges of his lips. He turned to the big star-faced bay and his voice steadied to the firm quiet tone the horse knew so well. "Let 'em have it, Rambler. Come on! Let 'em have it."

The big horse rolled his full flashing eyes. Down went the long head, almost to the ground. The slender forelegs braced. Both hind feet lashed out, the big steel-shod hooves lashing into the air with murderous force.

Lander involuntarily backed a step. "Cripes! The dang brute'll kick the stars outa the sky! But you ain't goin' to be

around to tell him to let 'em have it after Dill Gross takes him over, you know."

Johnny laughed, a short and ugly sound, without mirth. "I reckon that ain't gonna make much difference, boss. Mart, you haul off as if you was gonna kick him—then see how fast you can move!"

Mart cocked one eye dubiously at the big horse, but he approached him gingerly and swung back his right boot. He swung it viciously, as if he meant to strike, though the toe of the boot did not come within foot of the gleaming bay hide. Then he leaped out of the way so quickly that he almost threw himself off balance.

The big horse gave voice to a shrill challenging neigh. Again the long slender head went down, the smooth-muscled body half-swung half-twisted about, the forelegs braced, and steel-shod hind feet lashed out, slashing the air where Mart Leverage had stood an instant before.

Johnny laughed again, in savage triumph. "Just let Dill Gross, or any other hairpin, try to kick him, or stick a hayfork into him like Dill's so fond of doin'. He's gonna pick himself up sort of messed in spots, if he can pick himself up at all."

Lander turned to his own mount, repressing an impulse to smile. "Looks like you sure learned him to protect hisself all right, Johnny. You better warn Dill when he shows up."

"I reckon that's the first thing I'm gonna do," said Johnny.

DILL GROSS came back from jail the next day, having served his full term for cruelty to animals. He seemed in a chastened mood, but Johnny Fields didn't like the gleam in Dill's small hard eyes.

Johnny had hung around the ranch yard all forenoon, waiting for Dill to put in an appearance, and when Dill came riding down the lane, Johnny walked out

to meet him. Dill reined in his horse, a horse that had been sent in to town for him, and looked Johnny up and down with a mocking leer.

"Well, well, if it ain't my old pal right on the job waitin' for me."

Johnny did not smile. "You bet your damn life I've been waitin' for you. I got a few things to tell you, then I ain't gonna waste any more words on you. While you been gone, the boss turned your horse over to me to gentle. I done got him topped off good. I learned him a few tricks, too. So I'm warnin' you right here and now, don't ever lay hand on him again with a hoe handle or a pitchfork. Don't kick him and don't stick nothin' at him. If you do, he'll lay you out with both hind feet. He'll put you in the hospital sure as hell, if he don't kill you."

Johnny turned on his heel and strode toward the barn, without a backward look toward the gaping Dill, who stared after him with whitening face and eyes gone wild with rage. Not looking back, Johnny failed to see that blast of fury rising in Dill Gross. He heard the boss come out of the ranch house and hail Gross, he heard Gross answer rather thickly, but still he did not look back. He went swiftly on into the barn where the big star-faced bay stood in his stall.

The horse swung about his head and nickered. Johnny blinked rapidly and leaned his forehead against the big bay's warm shining neck. His voice reached the horse's up-pricked ears in the sing-song monotone Rambler had learned to value above all other sounds.

"Well, he's here, boy. I done all I could for you, but you're gonna have to take care of yoreself from now on. It may not mean so much neither; he can still starve you, or throw boilin' water on you, or shoot you in the belly—he's done all them things to other horses. It's a hell of a world, when a yellow bellied

polecat like that can have the say over a gent like you. But Mart's right: they ain't nothin' we can do about it. Keep your chin up, fella—and—luck!"

He straightened and went out of the barn by the end door, so he wouldn't have to confront Dill Gross again. His face looked a little drawn. He swallowed two or three times painfully. But when he emerged from the barn to join Mart Leverage in the barn yard beyond, he looked pretty much like himself, save that his grey eyes were unusually hard and bright.

Dill Gross had come home to find fall roundup on. There were long hard days in the saddle—bawling fighting calves to rope and brand—scattered herds to bring in and cut out and segregate . . . The cook worked overtime, and extra hands moved over the ranch.

Johnny was here, there and everywhere, but he managed to keep a weather eye Dill's way, waiting in suspense to know what would happen when Dill really took Rambler over. For a while Dill left Rambler to himself and used other horses for the roping and cutting. He had a healthy respect for any horse's hooves, a sneaking fear, rather, and he knew that horse-trainers didn't come much better than Johnny Fields.

Johnny's fears weren't allayed to any extent. Mart said that maybe Dill was sufficiently intimidated by Johnny's warning to fear ever using harsh methods with Rambler again.

Johnny gave a short bitter laugh. "Don't believe it! He's just the kind of dang fool that thinks he knows it all. I hope to cripes you're right, though, and that he's got enough brains to keep his hands off that horse."

DILL might have had brains enough, but they worked the wrong way. He waited till most of the speculation among the punchers as to what extent he was

reformed had died down before he made any move to determine how well Johnny Fields had taught Rambler to take care of himself. Then he waited till nobody was around, and walked softly into the barn, and shied a kick at Rambler's rump. Just by way of informing Rambler that his boss had come home.

The only thing that saved him was the fact that he leaped back just in case the fool horse did take a slash at him. At that, Rambler's heels didn't miss him by a hand's width.

Dill stood leaning against the barn wall for a minute, shaking and white-faced, shuddering to think what would have happened to him had he not gotten out of the way. Then swift-rising fury drowned his fear. His eyes blazed with murderous hate. He glared at the big horse, muttering savagely under his breath.

"So, that's the kind of devil he's made you into, huh? Damn your ornery hide, I'll take it out of you. Just wait till the whole lousy crew's bedded down, and me'n you'll have a session you won't forgit very soon." He turned and stamped angrily out of the barn.

Johnny Fields and Mart Leverage, sitting on the bunkhouse porch, saw him come out and noted the blind rage in his face. They glanced at each other significantly.

"He's been in there pesterin' Rambler," Johnny said grimly. "You wait. Somethin's gonna happen to that guy. Rambler ain't gonna take nothin' off nobody."

But neither Johnny nor Mart had any idea just what might be in Dill's head till they were wakened late that night by Rambler's angry neigh. They both sat up in their bunks and listened. The horse bellowed in fury and pain, and the night air resounded to the battering blows of his steel-shod hooves against the boards of the box stall.

Within another instant the whole crew

was awake and piling out of the bunkhouse, Johnny in the lead. By the time the men reached the barn, there was no more shattering bedlam. The horse was quiet and there was no sound of Dill's voice. Johnny took down a lantern from a peg just inside the barn door, lighted it and led the way swiftly into Rambler's stall.

Two boards had been battered off the side of the stall. The big horse was standing with his long slender head up, breathing heavily, his sides and barrel heaving, his full eyes flashing and rolling. Across his rump ridged four long ugly welts. In several places the welts had cut deep and blood welled from the cuts, oozing down his rump and flank.

At the edge of the box stall lay a length of rusty old log chain, with blood and bay hair sticking to a few of its end links.

Close to the chain Dill Gross stretched prone on his back. One of his hands was clasped laxly on the other end of the chain. Blood trickled from his scalp where Rambler's steel shoe had grazed his skull. But he was breathing, and his jaw muscles were twitching.

Johnny handed the lantern to Mart Leverage. His face was livid under its tan, and his eyes were like smoked ice. His voice gritted harshly between set teeth.

"Take the light, Mart. Somebody help me carry this son to the bunkhouse. Somebody else go for Doc Reedy."

But after they got Dill into the bunkhouse, Johnny didn't linger. He spent the rest of the night in the barn, and nobody asked why. Rambler was placid and amiable in the morning. The welts had subsided and the slashes in his hide were clean and healing. The doctor said Dill wasn't hurt much. He'd been knocked out, he'd have a headache and a sore skull for a few days. In less time than that he'd be as ornery as ever.

GUY LANDER chucked him off the ranch bag and baggage, and he didn't let him take Rambler. "You'll leave that horse right where it is," Lander said curtly. "I'm givin' you fifty dollars for him. That's one piece of good horseflesh you ain't goin' to ruin. Get off this ranch and stay off!"

"Oh, I'll get," Dill retorted savagely. "Keep your hair on! But you ain't keepin' that horse. You couldn't pay me fifty hundred for him. He ain't for sale. He's mine. When I git ready for him, I'll send the sheriff after him."

Johnny said to Mart Leverage: "Yah! Like hell he will. He ain't goin' near the sheriff. And he'd die afore he'd admit he's afraid of Rambler. We want to keep our eyes peeled. That jasper is goin' to pull somethin' shore as yore a foot high."

The whole crew was hilarious on two counts the next week. Dill Gross was banished from their vicinity and the roundup was over. The last of the strays were returned to their home ranches, the extra hands were paid off and departed. The customary resultant spree in town followed as a matter of course. The hands of the Rocking L rode townward in high spirits, railing at each other and singing hilarious ribald songs, mostly off key.

All but Mart and Johnny. Mart lay in his bunk, and raised his dizzy head to stare through the window. "Me, gittin' the flu at a time like this!" he raged at Johnny, who was sitting on the end of his own bunk. "Where the devil did I ever git flu at this time of year?"

"Flu ain't got no time of year especial," Johnny answered. "You just get it, and you got it."

"Your tellin' me! I'm dizzy as a locoed dogie. Lookit! All the boys done beat it to town, and me layin' in bed like a sissy. I got a notion to go straddle my bronc and foller 'em. Once I git my skin full of whiskey, there wouldn't be no room left for the flu."

"You'll play hell," Johnny snapped, rising from the bunk. "Shut your mouth and act growed up. I got enough whiskey to last till the boys get back, and I told Pokey to bring us a new supply."

"Told Pokey to—ain't you goin'?"

"What the devil I wanta go to town for?" Johnny retorted. "I'm stayin' to keep the boss and the missus comp'ny." He started toward the door. "You take it easy, and don't go messin' around. After I fetch you that bottle, I'm goin' out and get Rambler curried down good."

THE sun was lowering to the brow of the mountains in the west; when Beezy Benoit from the Bar-Q came riding down the road, turned in at the Rocking-L lane, and advanced to halt by the corral where Johnny was currying the big bay.

Johnny turned to voice a greeting. "Hi, there, Beezy! Ain't you guys goin' into town tonight?"

Beezy shoved back his hat and lounged in the saddle. "Yeah, sure. I just dropped by to leave you word about old He-Goat."

Johnny stared. "Huh? What'n hell's the matter with him? Last I seen of him he was over in the west pasture. Boy, anything happened to old He-Goat, the boss'd go hog wild. That's the best dang bull we got on the Rockin'-L."

"And the meanest," Beezy supplemented dryly. "If he wasn't so dang mean I'd a rid down for him myself. Kind of figured he might be easier for you boys to handle what knowed him better. He's bogged down in that big mudhole in Bog Canyon."

Johnny glared his disgust. "How'd he ever get into Bog Canyon! Sure can't leave him there till mornin' to thrash himself to death tryin' to fight outa the mud. Reckon I better get to Bog Canyon ronto! Thanks for tellin' me."

"Yeah, you bet. Be seein' you."

Beezy rode away, headed for town, and Johnny led Rambler into the barn to his stall. Johnny saddled a light wiry pinto and went into the bunkhouse to tell Mart where he was going. "If the boss or the missus asks where I went, just tell 'em I had to go out on a little passear. No use worryin' 'em about old He-Goat. I'll just drag him out and say nothin' about it."

"You ain't ridin' Rambler?"

"Cripes, no! On that trail? Well, I'll be back. Take it easy."

The sun had dropped below the mountain tops when Johnny sent the pinto loping across country toward Bog Canyon. He had reached the first winding rim of Bog Canyon in the fading afterglow at about the time Mart decided that the scent he had been smelling was smoke.

That jerked him upright out of bed. He reeled forward, half fell, then went toward the house at a staggering run. He managed to reach the back door and lean against the wall and pound and yell for help.

"Boss! Miz' Lander! Boss! The barn's afire!"

Mrs. Lander came hurrying to the door in answer to his frantic calling, and as she swung the door open and saw the sinister glare of the flames, she cried loudly to Lander: "Pa! Pa! Come quick! The barn's afire!"

Mart's cry was added to hers. "Rambler's in the barn, boss! And your claybank. And my black and the missus' little sorrel!"

Mrs. Lander said sharply: "Mart, you calm down and get back to bed. Pa'll fetch the other horses out, and Johnny can handle Rambler. The barn's old. 'Tain't much loss. Tell Johnny that Guy'll be right out—"

"Johnny ain't here," Mart groaned.

Lander came rushing from the front room. "Well, where the hell is he?"

"Over to Bog Canyon, boss. Old He-Goat got bogged."

"Well, you go on back to bed. I'll take care of the horses." Lander leaped off the porch and went running toward the burning barn.

Mart shoved himself away from the wall and staggered toward the steps. Mrs. Lander caught his arm. "Mart! You got to get back to bed."

Mart swallowed hard. "Miz' Lander, Johnny'd ruther die than see anythin' happen to that horse. I'm goin' over to the barn, ma'am. I'm goin' if I have to crawl on all fours."

Mrs. Lander discarded all effort at dissuasion. She helped Mart down the steps, and they went toward the barn together, as swiftly as Mart could walk. The thud of pounding hooves and snorts of fright came from the barn above the rising crackle of flames. The fire was leaping rapidly up the end wall of the old building.

Lander came running from the horse trough, where he had been sloshing a jute sack in the water. He shouted urgently at his wife.

"You'n Mart stay back there! The barn's goin' up like tinder. It's dry as straw after all this hot weather, and the loft's still half full of last year's hay! You stay back!" He whirled, and disappeared into the maw of the open door.

"He'll never get Rambler," Mart said shakily. "The only man on earth that can git Rambler outa there is Johnny. The horse is gonna be scared wild. He won't have a lick of sense. He'll kick holes in anybody that goes nigh him. Miz' Lander, I got to take the first horse the boss brings out and go for Johnny!"

"Don't talk like a fool, Mart!" Mrs. Lander's voice held tart reproof. "You couldn't ride ten yards without fallin' off. Pa'll git the horses out all right."

Mart shook his head in dismal despair. He'll never git Rambler! Miz' Lander,

what ever set that barn afire? They wan't no way for it to jest get afire. The hay was dry. It couldn't a started itself off."

Lander came out of the barn, leading the claybank, the wet sack across its nostrils and eyes. He shouted at them: "Everything's all right, Ma. Don't worry. I'll git 'em out easy."

"Not Rambler," groaned Mart again. "Cripes, if Johnny would only come."

BUT Johnny was just urging the pinto up onto the first rim of Bog Canyon. There was a queer uneasiness in him. Funny the way the whole thing had happened. How had old He-Goat ever got out of the west pasture and rambled away over here? Funny it happened when there was nobody at the Rocking-L to come for the bull but himself. Seemed almost like somebody wanted to get him away from the ranch right about then. But what for? It didn't make sense. He had a nagging premonition that something was wrong somewhere.

He decided he wasn't going to barge into the canyon hot-foot. He was going to make sure old He-Goat was there first. He rode out onto a jutting point from which he could see the canyon bed.

The last light of the sunset reached to the nigh side of the canyon. It lay in a sharply defined band across the big bog, gleaming dully on the watery surface. Johnny stared and blinked, and cursed. The surface of the bog was as spotless and unruffled as the surface of a washed mirror. For an instant Johnny sat erect and rigid in the saddle, staring. Then he swore a furious oath and wheeled the pinto about.

"Dang it, I knowed somethin' was fishy somewheres!" He drummed his heels against the pinto's ribs.

Darkness had fallen by the time Johnny topped the last ridge heading the long slope into the valley where the

Rocking-L buildings lay. In the dusk, a pillar of ruddy-lighted smoke rose in the clear air.

LANDER came out of the barn leading the sorrel, whipped the wet sack from the small animal's face and turned it free.

Mart said thickly, "Rambler!"

Lander stepped close, his face bleached in the bright light of the roaring flames, rivulets of sweat running paths through the scot and smudge on his cheeks. "Listen, son. I feel as bad about it as you do. But you was right. I can't do a thing with him. I tried my damndest, but he won't let me git near him."

Mart stared, dizzy and speechless. The whole end wall of the barn was now a solid sheet of flame. All along the top of the high wall near the door the fire was blazing. Inside the barn, above the roar and crackle, the frantic crashing of Ram-

bler's hooves pounded. The mad snorting of the terrorized horse sounded faintly, like a sputtering bellows.

Mrs. Lander sobbed. "Oh, Pa—Pa! It'll break Johnny's heart! That beautiful horse! I can't stand it."

Mart drew himself erect. "I'm goin' in there. Rambler knows me. I been around a lot when Johnny was trainin' him—"

"You'll stay outa there!" Lander gripped his arm so hard that Mart winced. "He'll kick the insides outa you, you danged fool! That end wall's goin' to fall in any minute!"

Mrs. Lander swallowed a sob and pointed. "Dill! Where'd he come from? I thought you told him to stay away from here."

Lander wheeled, and both he and Mart stared where she pointed.

Dill Gross had come into sight from beyond the barn. He was running toward

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the barn door, either unaware of their presence or ignoring it completely. As they all watched, dumbfounded by his sudden appearance, he plunged in through the flame-rimmed door at a run.

Then they became conscious of drumming hooves behind them. Across the field, straight toward the flaming barn, came the racing pinto, Johnny leaning low in the saddle. Lander gasped. The pinto dashed up like a whirlwind and Johnny cleared the saddle.

Lander shouted at him. "Here!" He hurled the wet sack toward him. "Dill's in there. So's Rambler. I couldn't get near him. I think maybe Dill went in after him."

Johnny caught the sack deftly, without slackening his pace, and followed Dill through the flame-swathed doorway.

Johnny charged into the suffocating heat and stench and smoke with his eyes narrowed to slits, breathing meagerly from the tops of his lungs. He plunged down the long length of the barn toward Rambler's stall. Tears sprang to his smarting eyes, blurring his sight, as he neared the stall.

Close to the stall Dill lay senseless, a hideous gash on one side of his head, a gash from which the blood was pouring through his hair, over his face and onto the floor.

The terrified star-faced bay was rearing and dragging back on his halter rope. Johnny shouted furiously: "Rambler! Down! I'm here now. Nothin' gonna hurt you. Down, boy! Down!"

The big horse settled to all fours. He nickered, and lifted his head, ears pricked forward. His stinging eyes still rolled, his big nostrils expanded and fluttered in the drive of his terror, but he stood. Johnny stepped to the horse's head, and swathed the wet sack across the broad flat forehead, across the rolling eyes and the flaring big nostrils.

Then he backed and bent over Dill.

Dill was breathing jerkily, painfully. Johnny looked down at him with merciless grim eyes. No good to the world, to himself or anybody else. This was a fitting end for a skunk. With his head bashed in that way, he'd never know anything again.

From the other end of the barn came a hissing roar. Blinding light flared high. Johnny jerked his head about and caught his breath, choked on the smoke he dragged into his lungs. His eyes dilated in dismay. The whole far end wall of the barn had fallen in; across the door was a flaming, impassable barrier.

JOHNNY whirled, snatched at Rambler's halter rope and yanked it free of the manger. "Come on, boy. We gotta get outa here!"

He started toward the nigh end wall, leading the horse. The walls were all burning along the tops, now, the flames roaring nearer the dry hay overhead.

"There's just one chance," he muttered to the horse. "Turn around, Rambler. Come on, boy. Get around there." He swung the horse, rump toward the wall, and dared a deeper breath. "Okay, boy, let 'em have it!"

Rambler made a smothered sound behind the wet sack that covered his face. Down went the long narrow head. The forelegs braced. The hind feet lashed out. The big steel-shod hooves drove like a battering ram against the end wall. Burned loose at the top, rotten at the bottom, the boards flew outward. Johnny shoved the horse over. The heavy hind hooves lashed out again. The shattered falling timbers formed a burning barrier, but it was lower and narrower than the barrier to freedom at any other place.

Johnny turned and glanced back at Dill's motionless bleeding body. And from somewhere within him a still small voice spoke inexorably: "You can't do that. He's a human being. He may be a

very poor excuse for one, but he's a man."

Johnny stood like stone for an instant, then he whirled, and ran back to Dill. Frantically he lifted the limp body in his arms, snatched a rope from the nearest peg in the stall, and raced back to Rambler. The tears poured from his stinging eyes till he could scarcely see, and his body was wet with sweat. His breath sobbed in his lungs as he heaved Dill over the horse's back.

Outside the barn, Lander turned at the sound of voices and horse's hooves, to see Beezy Benoit and the Rockin-L men galloping their horses down the unfenced lane toward the burning barn. Beezy dragged his racing mount to a halt. "I felt kinda mean," he panted, "sendin' Johnny down there alone to drag old He-Goat out. I took a short cut for Bog Canyon. Old He-Goat wasn't there. I figured somethin' was phony. I barged into town and told your boys Dill had lied to me about He-Goat bein' bogged, and was prob'ly tryin' to pull somethin'—"

"Keep still!" Lander cut in sharply. "What's that noise?"

From the far end wall of the barn came the battering crash of steel-shod hooves against wood. In a mad melee the whole group rushed down to that end of the burning building. Flames leaped into the sky as the hay in the loft went up like powder. The inside of the barn was lighted as bright as day.

Johnny was urging the horse toward the other end of the barn, toward the flaming end wall which had fallen in. Then suddenly he wheeled the big horse about. He tugged at the rope about Rambler's neck.

"Get down to it, boy. Lay your belly to the ground!" He started at a run toward the wall section that had been kicked down by Rambler's lashing feet, that lay in a burning barrier on the

ground. Just before they reached it, his shout rose again. "Take it, big boy! Take it, baby! *Take it!*"

The bay horse reared. Countless times he had heard and obeyed that command, "Take it!" And there was always only a fence or a bush or some such trivial thing to hurdle. He set himself for the leap.

Johnny's arms flashed upward just in time, and locked tight around the long slender neck.

The powerful bay's legs tightened and thrust like steel pistons. The bay body launched up, up into the air, over the barrier of the fallen wall, through smoke and licking flame, into air beyond that was cool and clear. With one man tied to his back, with another clinging desperately to his strong neck, with baffled death and blistering terror at his heels, Rambler had cleared the wall his own battering hooves had razed and soared to safety!

The claspings hands loosed from his neck and Johnny fell before him. . . .

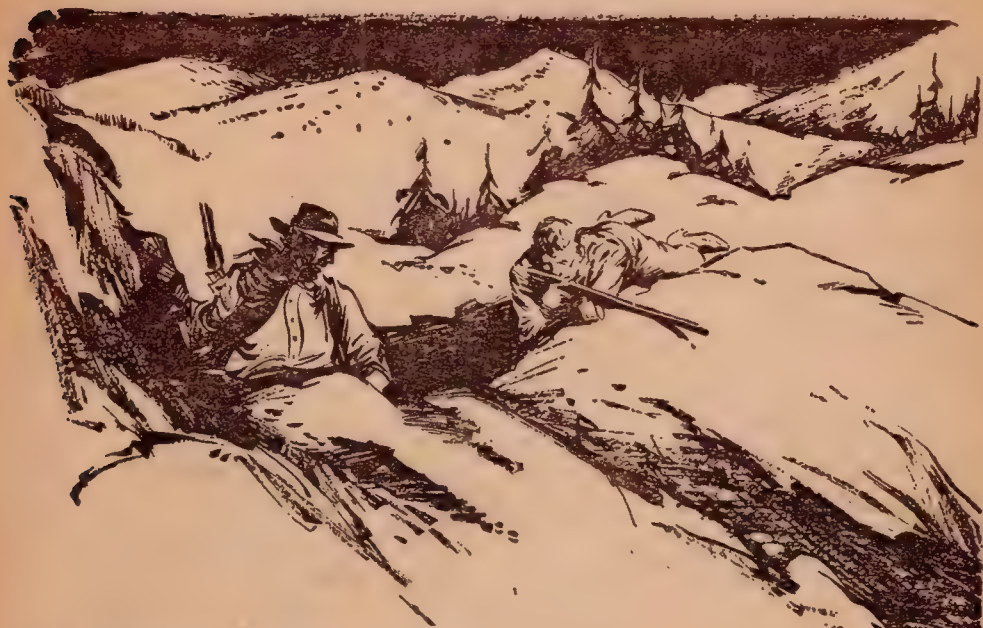
THE doctor said, some two hours later: "I did all I could, Johnny. But no man could live with a gash like that in his head. I guess he didn't deserve very much to live. He talked a little. He admitted setting fire to the barn to get even with you and burn the horse; to decoying you away with the lie about He-Goat, knowing you'd never take a big horse like Rambler down the Bog Canyon trail. But something better was in him somewhere. At the last, he couldn't do it, and he went in to try to save the horse himself."

Johnny sucked a deep breath into his smoke-gorged lungs, said nothing.

Doc Reedy continued. "He wanted you to have Rambler, Johnny. Looks like, sometimes in this world, a man gets what he earns."

THE VIGILANTES OF

When Joel Armstrong swore the Vigilante oath, he vowed to uphold a justice code more grim and deadly cold than the bitter blizzards of Montana. He didn't know then that the bonds of brotherhood held tighter than a hangman's rope!



A Boom-Camp Novelette

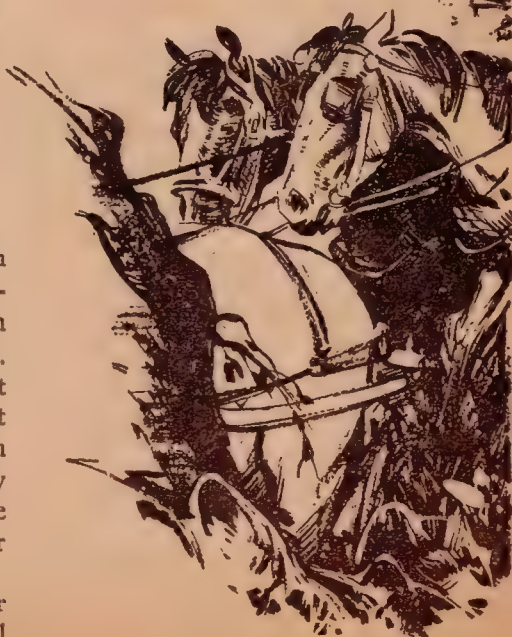
By NORMAN A. FOX

CHAPTER ONE

Death Waits at Bannack

THE road out of Fort Benton writhed across a barren, snow-swept world. Numbing, ice-laden wind beat against the laboring stage coach. This was a land where danger dwelt, yet the fear that shook Joel Armstrong wasn't inspired by the perils of the road. Zach Armstrong was waiting in Bannack City and Joel Armstrong suddenly realized he was afraid to meet the brother he'd never known!

It was crazy, of course. Yet the fear was there and Joel wondered if the girl



HELL'S HALF-ACRE

beside him could notice it. She was bundled in a heavy coat but it could not hide her alluring femininity any more than the shawl about her head could conceal the golden ringlets that persisted in escaping to frame her oval face. Her name was Vallery Huxley. Joel had learned that since both had boarded the stage at Benton, the only passengers to Bannack. He decided he would like to know a great deal more.

With his eyes upon her, she stirred restlessly but, glancing at him, she smiled, a gesture both warm and weary. Suddenly there was something else in the blue depths

of her eyes, something that tolled a warning to Joel even as the stage jerked to a bone-jolting stop.

"Road Agents!" the girl gasped.

There were two of them, armed with revolvers and sawed-off shotguns. One man was cadaverously lean, the other bulky and broad. The bulky one had covered the driver; the lean one rushed over and swung open the coach door.

"Get out and throw up your hands!" he rasped, emphasizing the command with a string of profanity that colored the girl's cheeks, raised the hackles on Joel's neck.

Joel swung from the coach, a tall, dark-



There were two of them, armed with revolvers and sawed-off shotguns. . . .

haired man in his late twenties who moved with a certain gracefulness in spite of a bullet-stiffened knee. He still wore an Army coat and in its pocket was an Army revolver, another souvenir of his service. But, standing in the snow, the girl beside him, he knew it would be suicide to try for his gun.

Ignoring Joel, the Road Agent faced the girl. "We're starting with you," the man said darkly. "Come on, pass over any dust you're carrying."

The girl's half-raised hands made a move to her bosom. "My fare from Benton took most of my money," she protested. "I have nothing of value."

But the Road Agent had seen and interpreted her gesture and the proof of it was in his avid eyes. "You figure on being stubborn, ma'am?" he snarled. "It's mighty cold for a lady to be undressin' outdoors. But if we got to get down to the skin to find your dust, we got to!"

Vallery Huxley's face flamed anew. "You . . . you wouldn't dare!" she flared.

But the cadaverous man was reaching for her. Above, the driver cursed impotently, and there was a note of reproach in the oath that burst from the other Road Agent. A red mist danced before Joel's eyes.

ON THE way to Benton, Joel had heard much about the Road Agent Band, that highly-organized group which was spreading dark terror in Bannack and Virginia City and the other gold-camps. Rumor spoke of their elaborate spy-system, their cabalistic signs and signals. Their ruthlessness and brutality was well known. So Joel's action was as foolish as it was gallant.

His fist caromed off the masked jaw of the lanky man. The Road Agent had been too intent upon the girl to see it coming. Sprawling backward into the snow, he cursed viciously. And his big companion, afraid to use his shotgun because of his

partner's nearness, triggered his revolver.

But Joel, pivoting, was a poor target and he was discarding his mitten, clawing for his own gun. When it was in his hand, the cadaverous man was running with a peculiar, shuffling lope toward his horse. Joel let him go. The bulky man with the gun was the real menace and Joel sweeping Vallery Huxley aside with his free arm, blazed at the horseman.

Dropping his gun, the fellow clutched his left arm above the elbow. The stage-driver was firing from the coach top now but he was rattled and his lead went wild. The lanky Road Agent vaulted into the saddle and in a split-second it was all over. Cursing, the two spurred into sheltering timber, disappearing almost instantly.

Vallery Huxley sagged weakly against Joel. Lifting her into the coach, he signalled the driver. Joel breathed easier as the coach got underway but Vallery, breathless, took a long time finding her voice. "I want to thank you, Mr. Armstrong," she said at last. "It . . . it was splendid and I'm deeply grateful. You see, I was carrying valuables."

Joel grinned. "I guessed as much," he admitted.

"I'm carrying currency, a rarity in this section," the girl explained. "Its loss would have been a great blow to Justin Huxley, my uncle. He's a merchant in Bannack and he's in debt to a Mr. Satterlee. Another uncle of mine, in Fort Benton, offered this money. I thought a girl would be more apt to get through, and finally convinced Uncle Justin. But some of the Road Agents seem to stop at nothing."

Joel's face darkened. "I've heard of them. I hope someday I'll get a chance to really hit at their breed!"

She glanced at him long and intently, "Perhaps you shall," she said enigmatically. "Will you be in Bannack long?"

"From now on, I guess," he said and his reply reminded him of Zach Arm-

strong. He'd forgotten his brother since the holdup. "I hope to team up with my brother. Do you know Zach Armstrong?"

She had to shake her head. "Bannack is full of names—and faces. Perhaps my uncle knows him. Does he look like you?"

"Gosh, I don't know," he confessed and, seeing her bewilderment, blurted on. "You see, Zach is fifteen years older than me and he ran away when I was three. According to my folks, he had a wild streak. He never came home, but we heard from him regularly—California, Nevada, wherever gold was to be found. . . ."

Vallery's eyes glowed. "Meeting him will be a real thrill for you!"

Joel nodded. "I owe a heap to Zach," he said slowly. "Back in Illinois the Armstrongs had a proud name—and that's about all. Zach never forgot his folks or his kid brother. He always sent money home, money that gave me schooling better than some. Zach gave me my chance. I'm hoping I can do something for him now. . . ."

And somewhere in his own words he found his old fear again. He hadn't voiced it but he could name it now. In his heart he'd carried a picture of Zach, not of face or figure but of a stature beyond measuring. Armstrong men were proud men, men of achievement. And the fear was that Zach, parted from his family, might have forgotten that. And for Zach's sake, Joel desperately wanted his brother to measure up to tradition.

BUT there was no room for fear on these last miles of the journey. There was something about Vallery Huxley that made other things seem insignificant. Joel even dismissed the Road Agents from his mind and was only reminded of them again when the stage rolled into Bannack and the driver, unloading, began a colorful retelling of the adventure to the crowd. Joel helped the girl from the stage.

"May I see you to your uncle's?"

She shook her head. "It isn't far, and I'll get my baggage later. I know you're anxious to find your brother. But why not call on us tonight? Uncle will want to add his thanks."

Her parting grip was firm and Joel, watching her melt into the milling crowd, knew something had entered his life which had been missing before. But another matter also had a place in his heart and he turned to attend to it.

Surging humanity crowded the street. Joel hailed a muscular fellow whose hair fell to his shoulders.

"Know where I could find Zach Armstrong?" the ex-soldier asked.

"Zach Armstrong. . . ." the fellow pondered, then nudged a courtly looking man who was listening intently to the stage-driver's story. "Seen anything of Zach Armstrong, Mr. Plummer?"

Plummer smiled affably. "Not today," he replied and eyed Joel. "So you're the young man who routed those two desperadoes today. Let me shake your hand, sir. I'm Henry Plummer, the sheriff. If I can be of any assistance to you, I shall deem it a pleasure and a privilege."

And thus Joel, explaining his quest, found himself crossing palms with Henry Plummer, that man of ill-starred destiny.

"Perhaps it will be best if you proceed to yonder hotel," Plummer commented. "I'll pass the word along and the first person to find Zach can send him to you."

Joel accepted this advice. It would be silly to seek a man he'd never seen. Carpet bag in hand, he hurried to the hotel and, alone in a room, freshened himself, then took a chair to the window to study the turbulent street below.

An hour passed. He found himself nervous as a schoolboy at his first love-tryst. He found himself shaping wild dreams for the days to come, dreams he would shape with Zach. And then, as darkness crept over the camp, a boot-sole scraped and the door behind him creaked open.

"Hello, kid!" a jovial voice boomed. "Know your brother Zach?"

JOEL overturned the chair coming to his feet. A big, broad-shouldered man stood in the doorway. And in that minute of their meeting, Joel knew that this bluff, ruddy-faced stranger was far different than himself, far different than the brother he'd pictured. But he also knew he was going to like him. He stumbled across the room, hand outstretched.

They locked fingers for most of a minute. Then the older man held the younger at arm's length. "It's mighty good to see you, Joel," he said at last. "Your letters were few and probably I didn't get some of them. But I'm mighty proud of you, kid. You didn't say much about your war record in your letters but I could read between the lines. And the whole street's shouting about what you did out on the road!"

This turn of the talk embarrassed Joel. "But what about you?" he asked. "I'm hoping to stay out here, Zach, team up with you, I'm hoping there's things I can do for you. I'd . . . I'd sort of like a chance to repay. . . ."

Zach laughed. "For that schooling? Forget it," he chuckled. "We're sitting pretty, kid. Me and my partner, Birch Kimbro, got into these diggings late but the old Armstrong luck held out. We hit a mighty rich claim. A cut-bank caved in on Birch and it's all mine now. It hit me hard, loosing Birch. But I'll need a new partner to help me work the claim, come Spring. Reckon you'd do?"

"I'll work," Joel promised eagerly. "This knee of mine fixed me so I can't stand army marching but I've got arms to swing a pick and shovel and I can ride. We'll make it—together!" He squeezed Zach's arm fervently and the big man winced.

"You're hurt!" Joel cried.

"Me?" Zach said quickly. "Shucks, no.

I . . . I got a boil just above my elbow. It's damn touchy."

"I'm sorry," Joel managed to say. He crossed to the window. Suddenly a staggering suspicion was shaping in his mind, and he had to force himself to stop thinking.

"I . . . I've got to call on a young lady tonight," he said lamely. "I met her on the stage. I hate to run off when we've got so much to talk about but I didn't expect to find you when I promised her I'd visit her."

HE KNEW it sounded flat, unconvincing. He knew Zach was regarding him strangely. "Run along," Zach chuckled. "I wasn't expectin' you either and I've got friends to see. We'll have a big palaver tomorrow. But you'll need this. Here, catch—"

Joel snatched the heavy poke that arced through the air. "But I've got money," he protested.

Zach laughed. "You're in a town where flour's cheap when it's down to forty dollars a sack. Keep it, kid. It's from our claim, anyway."

They shook hands again and then Joel was hurrying to the street, almost running. Joel was like a man fleeing hopelessly from his own shadow. The suspicion persisted as he trudged along, blindly, aimlessly.

Zach Armstrong was the big Road Agent who had sat his horse at the hold-up! The evidence fitted too snugly to allow for coincidence. The massive build of the man was one factor, the wounded left arm was the other.

Joel had finally met the brother he'd worshipped—and his brother was an outlaw! The staggering certainty of it almost blinded Joel to his surroundings. He was only dimly aware that he'd reached a deserted section of the street and that the narrow space between two buildings yawned like a dark cave mouth beside

him. Some war-whetted instinct awoke him to a sense of danger just in time.

Flame streaked from the darkness. As he lurched violently, Joel heard lead hum past his ear. The nearness of death left him weak, but only for a moment. Then he was snatching for his own gun, diving into that narrow alley as the would-be assassin's boot-heels thudded in swift retreat.

Joel had one brief glimpse of a lanky figure with a queer, shuffling run. But that was all he needed. Plunging after the man, Joel had a hunch that in his brief hours in Bannack he had already encountered *both* of the Road Agents who had stopped the stage this day.

CHAPTER TWO

Shadow of Suspicion

PAIN knifed through Joel's wounded knee and he stumbled over shapeless debris, sprawled in the darkness. But he was up again instantly for he ached to close with the killer. Once the man turned to fire again and Joel, marking the gun-flash, sent lead in return. A rectangle of light was momentarily etched against the Stygian gloom as the lanky man dived through the rear doorway of a building.

Joel was a minute behind him. But as he charged through the same doorway he came to a halt. His quarry had outwitted him. The door gave access to a crowded saloon where men lined a plank bar three deep, clustered about gaming tables. The lanky man was lost, a living needle in a human hay-stack.

Panting, Joel paused and lifted his gaze to meet Henry Plummer's who leaned at the end of the bar, an untouched drink before him.

"Happen to see a man run in here?" Joel asked. "A tall gent looking like a walking skeleton?"

"Cap Satterlee?" Plummer queried. "I

think he came in a moment ago although I might be mistaken for I wasn't paying particular attention. Why?"

Cap Satterlee. . . . It took a full second for the significance of that name to touch a chord in Joel's memory. Satterlee was the man Vallery Huxley had mentioned, the man to whom Justin Huxley was indebted. Had Satterlee planned to prevent that debt from being paid?

"A man just took a shot at me," Joel told Plummer. "I chased him into this saloon."

Plummer frowned. "Hmmm," he reflected. "I can hardly believe it was Cap Satterlee, sir. He is a man of means, here in Bannack—hardly a person to stoop to murder. Aren't you mistaken?"

Joel was about to voice an indignant denial. He was about to tell Henry Plummer that there was no mistake, to tell the entire story of the holdup. But Henry Plummer was sheriff. Plummer was the law in this wild country. If he told his story to Plummer, he would have to tell all of it—the part that involved Zach as well.

"Perhaps I was mistaken," he mumbled. "Probably a score of men in Bannack answer the description I gave you."

"That's correct," Plummer conceded. "Why should Satterlee want to murder you, a stranger in Bannack?"

And Joel, walking into the night again, searched his mind for the answer to that question. Granting that Satterlee was the man who'd stopped the stage, why was the fellow risking possible exposure by becoming involved in a killing? Joel had bested him on the road. Was a thirst for revenge prompting the lanky man or did his motive go deeper than that?

Joel didn't know, but after he'd eaten, he decided to see the Huxleys. Justin Huxley might be able to unwittingly throw some light on the matter. But as Joel walked he had to admit that the thought of Vallery drew him as well.

From a miner he learned that Justin

Huxley lived apart from his store, occupying a cabin on Bannack's outskirts. When Joel found it, Vallery opened the door at his knock.

"**C**OME in," she cried eagerly. "I—Uncle and I were hoping you'd come tonight!"

She wore a snugly fitting black silk dress now, and with the gown accentuating her firm figure, the full rise of her young breasts, she was a picture to take Joel's breath. But, stepping across the threshold, he instantly swung his eyes to the two men in the room. One, a gray-headed oldster with the cherubic face of a beardless Santa Claus, was obviously Justin Huxley.

"Welcome to Bannack," Huxley cried. "My niece has told me about you—in fact she's spoken of little else. Have you met Mr. Satterlee, Mr. Armstrong?"

It was the lanky man. Cap Satterlee shifted uneasily. Looking at him now, Joel was almost certain that this was the man he'd pursued shortly. He was glad that Satterlee chose to bow stiffly rather than proffer a hand.

"I was about to leave," Satterlee said. "You'll find your receipt on yonder table, Huxley. I bid you good night!"

He adjusted a beaver top hat, stepped toward the door. Joel was right behind him. "I'd like a word—outside," Joel said.

Satterlee nodded coldly. Outside, Joel scraped a match. "Take a long look at me, Satterlee," he ordered. "Tell me if we've ever met before."

In that eerie glow Satterlee's own face hardened. In his unwavering eyes Joel saw his naked hatred, and knew he had made an implacable, deadly enemy.

"I think not," said Satterlee. "But perhaps we shall meet again."

The darkness swallowed him but the echo of his threat was icier than the air. Shrugging, Joel entered the cabin again.

Seeing the question in the eyes of both uncle and niece, he seized the first explanation that came to him.

"The man who directed me here asked me to give a message to Mr. Satterlee if he were here," he lied. "Sorry to have been so abrupt."

Vallery laughed, a little hollowly. "I'm . . . I'm glad," she said. "I wouldn't want you to be dealing with Mr. Satterlee."

Justin Huxley grinned. "Vallery has little use for her most persistent suitor," he observed. "Nor can I blame her."

"Cap Satterlee thinks he can buy anything he wants," the girl flared. "He thought I was mortgaged to him because uncle's store was. It must have been a bitter pill when he found us able to repay him tonight. I . . . I've had an uncanny feeling that he was one of those men out on the road today. He . . . he frightens me. . . ."

Justin Huxley patted her reassuringly. "There are many men in this wilderness who frighten others," he said. "But perhaps there shall be a different day soon. I know of no better time to tell this young man of the thing we discussed."

Joel, who had accepted a chair, looked his bewilderment. There was something in Justin Huxley's face now that wasn't cherubic. "I am attending a meeting tonight," Huxley said. "Would you care to come along, Mr. Armstrong?"

"A meeting?"

"**I** HAVE decided to confide in you, Mr. Armstrong," Huxley went on. "We need your kind and you come to us highly recommended. You see, I've read your war career in the papers. On top of that, your action in defending Vallery proves you again. We can use a man of your caliber, sir, in our cause. . . ."

"I don't understand," Joel said.

"We have formed a vigilante group here in Bannack, patterning it after the brave organization that cleaned up Frisco

in the days of the '49 rush. If you are interested and care to join us, come with me tonight."

Perplexed, Joel glanced at Vallery.

"Go, please, Mr. Armstrong," she urged, low-voiced. "I persuaded uncle to take you. I remembered what you'd said about wanting another chance to hit at them. . . ."

And that was argument enough for Joel Armstrong. Thus he found himself tramping through that bitterly cold night at the side of Justin Huxley, the snow crunching beneath their feet. In the back room of the Kinna-Nye store they found many men congregated. Soon Joel was shaking hands with Paris Pfouts and Captain James Williams and Wilbur F. Sanders and others. He had no way of knowing these were men of destiny to whom an entire state would one day be eternally grateful. But he did sense that they were men of high purpose and he found their spirit contagious.

Shortly afterwards he had a chance to chat with Colonel Sanders. And because the dark shadow of suspicion still clouded his thoughts, Joel surreptitiously broached his fear.

" . . . So you see, Colonel, Zach Armstrong is my brother but he's actually a stranger to me," he explained. "So before I join your organization, I'd like to know whether there is any mark against Zach."

"Every man is under suspicion, Mr. Armstrong," Colonel Sanders said gravely. "Even our sheriff. You look surprised, sir! Since you are to be one of us, there is no harm in telling you that some have long suspected Henry Plummer to be the leader of the Road Agent Band. But I can safely say Zach Armstrong's record is spotless."

"I'm glad to hear that, sir!" Joel exclaimed.

"We had occasion to check on Zach Armstrong," Colonel Sanders continued, smiling. "He was unknown to us, as was

his partner, until Birch Kimbro died. Kimbro's passing appeared to be accidental but since your brother came into full possession of a rich claim we deemed the matter worthy of investigation. We wrote to California since the partners came from there. I'm happy to report that although Kimbro's record was a bit unsavory, the only thing that might be said against Armstrong was that he was wild and reckless—and still is. But we've even considered him as a possible Vigilante recruit."

Those words lightened the load on Joel Armstrong's heart. They sustained him through the long meeting while a dozen reports were read, reports of depredations that woke Joel to the full extent of the Road Agent terror gripping this land. When twenty-four men were mustered for a dangerous mission he was glad to volunteer. The first telling blow was going to be struck at the lawless at once. Then came the time when Joel, with half-a-dozen other new recruits, stood in a circle in total darkness while Colonel Sanders administered the oath:

"We, the undersigned, uniting ourselves together for the laudable purpose of arresting thieves and murderers and recovering stolen property, do pledge ourselves on our sacred honor, each to all others, and solemnly swear that we will reveal no secrets, violate no laws of right, and never desert each other or our standard of justice, so help us God."

There was something mystic and thrilling about that moment to Joel, something akin to the times when a tattered flag had seemed worth the life-blood it took to defend it. This was a just cause, the kind of cause that had always drawn Armstrong men.

But with the oath still echoing in the hushed room, Joel Armstrong remembered, again, certain facts which Zach Armstrong's California record couldn't alter. Tomorrow Joel would be part of an

expedition bringing the beginning of law to this wilderness. And the uncanny sensation was strong upon him that someday soon, in order to fulfill his oath, he would have to place his brother in the unrelenting shadow of Vigilante justice.

CHAPTER THREE

Justice and Death

ALMOST two weeks had passed since the memorable night when Joel had taken the Vigilante oath.

Twelve days—days of bitter cold and heavy snow, days when the Vigilantes had pressed from Bannack to Deer Lodge creek and on to Cottonwood ranch, following a false trail. Days when the stock stampeded and rations ran low and discouragement stalked beside them. But now, at a ranch in Stinkingwater Valley, they had taken prisoners—Erastus "Red" Yeager, messenger of the Road Agent Band; and George Brown, corresponding secretary for the lawless group. A solemn council had judged the pair. The inevitable verdict had been reached. . . .

Justin Huxley, his skin-peeled, frost-bitten face a taut mask, led Joel to the bar-room where the prisoners were sleeping. Red Yeager, whose flaming hair and beard proclaimed the source of his sobriquet, awoke at Huxley's touch.

"The game's up, eh?" Red said. "I'm going to be hanged."

Joel had seen men face death before. He'd witnessed their passing amid the crash and clamor of the battlefield and in the stillness of Army hospitals. But the cold courage of the Road Agent messenger amazed him.

"It's pretty tough," Joel couldn't help but say.

"Yeah, it's pretty tough," Yeager echoed. "But I deserved this years ago. And there are men in the gang who deserve this even more than I do. Reckon

I could die happy if I could see them hanged or know that it would be done. I ain't saying this to get off. . . ."

Justin Huxley trembled with an inner excitement that communicated itself to Joel. Red Yeager wanted to confess! Red Yeager was willing to name the rest of the band!

"We're listening, Yeager," Huxley said. "But I can't promise you anything for talking."

Yeager nodded in understanding. "Plummer's the head," he said. "Bill Bunton's his right bower. . . ."

"Plummer!" Huxley echoed. "You sure about that, Red?" And to Joel, quickly:

"Write down the names, Joel—every one he gives!"

Joel fished out paper and a stub of pencil, scribbling as Yeager's voice droned. There were many names and most of them meant nothing to Joel—*Sam Bunton, Cyrus Skinner, Stephen Marsland, Dutch John Wagner*. . . .

Joel listed them eagerly. These were men who had murdered again and again. This was the band that had gotten a stranglehold on the territory. All the privations of the past few days seemed a small price, now, to have paid for this amazing information.

. . . *Aleck Carter, Whiskey Bill Graves, George Shears, Ned Ray, Buck Stinson*. . . .

The pencil moved on. A Vigilante poked his head through the doorway, called low-voiced to Justin Huxley. With a muttered protest, the merchant jerked himself to his feet and moved out of the room.

. . . *Frank Parish, Boone Helme, Cap Satterlee, Haze Lyons, Zach Armstrong*. . . .

The pencil froze in Joel's fingers, then scratched on mechanically. But something inside of him had died and his heart had gone from his work.

HE HADN'T seen Zach since that first night in Bannack. The Vigilantes had marched with the morning, and Joel had only been able to leave a note at the hotel, telling Zach he'd be back in a few days. But on the trail there'd been days—and nights—for thinking. And in a silent struggle Joel had weighed the evidence for and against Zach, weighed it until he'd grown weary. But now the last hope to sustain him was gone, and the shock of it made him numb, almost oblivious to the silent return to Justin Huxley.

. . . *George Lowry, Billy Page, Doc Howard, Jem Romaine.* . . . At last there was an end to names and information.

"Get them all?" Huxley asked excitedly. "Copy off the list on something, please Joel. You, Red; you'll have to come with me. . . ."

Copying the list, Joel was glad to have work for his fingers to do, work to coordinate his whirling faculties. He was dimly aware that Red Yeager was shaking hands all around, going to his death without flinching. He knew that George Brown was alternately praying and begging for mercy, but the drama of it all left him untouched.

How could there be room within him for any other feeling? Zach was a Road Agent! Zach had been named with the others! Like a hypnotized man, Joel saw that Justin Huxley was handing him a penciled map.

"I want you to head back to Bannack with a copy of that list," Huxley said. "Take it to headquarters and that way we'll get Plummer before he can smell the wind and run off. This map will show you the way. You might tell Vallery that I'll be home soon."

Joel arose. "Here's the list," he muttered.

Huxley extended his hand. "I've cottoned to you from the first, boy," the older said. "On this trip you've proved that you're one of us and all soldier be-

sides. The going may be hard from here on. If it is, try to look at it . . . the soldier's way. . . ."

And Joel, sensing no hidden meaning in those words, was only aware that he felt like a Judas. For Zach Armstrong's name wasn't on the list. He hadn't been able to force his fingers to shape it. And, like Judas, he slunk into the night. Behind him a cottonwood had borne grim fruit—two swaying bodies, one bearing a sign, "Red, Road Agent and Messenger!" the other, "Brown, Corresponding Secretary!"

The days that followed were hellish for Joel, days when he floundered through drifts, and bitter nights when he hobbled about a green willow fire, his wounded knee giving him agony. But that pain was as nothing for a greater pain filled his hours and sullied his dreams.

He found himself thinking of many things—the cased daguerreotypes his mother had cherished, those baby pictures of himself and Zach, taken fifteen years apart—the hush-filled cemetery where his parents rested. He found a small measure of solace because they could never know what he knew.

Nor could Joel escape his own conscience. Days on end he'd traveled with the Vigilantes, seeing them suffer the privations of a Montana winter so that order might prevail. Those men had wagered their lives in a grim gamble to establish law. And he was jeopardizing their cause to keep an Armstrong from rope's end.

He tried to make excuses for Zach. Zach's wild life had made him different than other Armstrongs. Hell, Zach didn't even look like an Armstrong! He tried to make excuses for himself. The escape of *one* Road Agent wouldn't matter. It was the breaking of the band that counted. For six long days and nights he lived with a lie. And he was still trying to reassure himself when he floundered into Bannack.

HE NEARED the Huxley cabin on the outskirts as he entered the camp. But the grim necessity of finding Zach, warning him to flee, made him forget Huxley's request that he see Vallery. Yet just as he was abreast of the cabin he was suddenly anchored, for a muffled scream reached him through the walls!

It sheared the tiredness from Joel. It brought him to the door in a single bound and then he glimpsed two saddled horses and a pack animal waiting nearby. That was when he identified Vallery's voice within.

"My uncle will kill you for this!" the girl was sobbing. "You—!"

Gloating laughter drowned her words. "Your uncle will be pretty busy for awhile," the voice of Cap Satterlee snarled. "But even if the jig's up and I've got to get out, I'm going to drag you along—"

Joel Armstrong crashed through the doorway. For one red-hazed moment he saw the tableau before him—Vallery struggling in Satterlee's long arms, her golden hair cascading about her shoulders, her dress torn at the bosom. Then Joel was dragging Satterlee from her, smashing his bony face.

Satterlee crashed to the floor only to bounce to his feet again. And Joel met him joyfully, his fatigue forgotten in a mad desire to break this man who had twice thought to defile a woman. Slashing through Satterlee's clumsy guard, he hit the man twice, dropping him to the floor again.

"Joel! Watch out!" Vallery screamed.

Satterlee was tugging a revolver from his pocket. Satterlee was squeezing the trigger and the bullet burned across Joel's shoulder. But now he'd reached his own gun. It bucked once and Satterlee, clutching his chest, sagged backwards.

Joel was crouching beside him instantly. One glance told him that Satterlee's wound was fatal. "You're dying," Joel

said. "The game's up now. Why did you try to kill me that first night in Bannack, Satterlee?"

"Go to hell!" Satterlee said spitefully.

That was the last thing the lanky man ever said, Joel came to his feet, a feeling of frustration upon him. Then Vallery was in his arms. Their lips met and by that gesture Joel knew then, that the thing which had touched his life at their meeting had also touched hers. They were still clinging to each other when the door opened to admit the last person Joel expected to see—Justin Huxley.

"VALLERY!" her uncle cried. "Somebody said there were shots—!"

But his eyes, flitting from Satterlee's corpse to the disheveled girl, told him the story and his frost-bitten face blackened with wrath.

"Satterlee was worst than the rest," he said. "They at least respected women. But Satterlee symbolized the ruthlessness of the Road Agent breed. Looks like we beat you to Bannack, Joel. You can understand why we hurried once we had that list of names."

"I understand," said Joel.

But he found himself wondering if he did. Had he recognized the full significance of the Vigilante cause? Had he known how much it really mattered? These men were fighting to make the wilderness safe for home-seekers. These men were fighting so honest men could walk in shadows safely and honest woman could feel secure.

He glanced at Vallery, saw his love for her mirrored in her own eyes. He shuddered, remembering the fate she might have suffered.

"I've got business to attend to," Justin Huxley was saying in a strangely unnatural voice. "Will you stay with Vallery, Joel?"

But Joel scarcely heard him. For the words that were dinning in Joel's ears

were other words. *"We will violate no laws of right . . . and never desert our standards of justice . . . so help us God . . ."*

"Wait!" said Joel. "Before you go, there's another name to be added to the list—my brother Zach's. . ."

It was out now. But a load seemed to be lifted from Joel. He had done the only right thing to do.

"I know," Justin Huxley said. "I came back into the room in time to hear Red Yeager name him. Don't you see, Joel? That's why I sent you the long way back to Bannack. I'd hoped the rest of us would get back here and finish the work so you wouldn't have to have a hand in it. We've captured and tried Plummer, Stinson, Ray . . . and Zach, too. They were hanging Buck Stinson when I left. . ."

"Then . . . !" Joel gasped.

"It isn't in my heart to hold it against you for trying to cover your brother," Justin Huxley said. "And I'm truly sorry for you now, son. But I imagine Plummer and Zach Armstrong have both been hanging since. All you can do for him now is pray for his soul. . ."

CHAPTER FOUR

Road Agent's Redemption

ZACH had been hung! The abruptness of the news staggered Joel but by the time he'd overcome the shock of it, he'd found one small ray of hope in Justin Huxley's words. Perhaps Zach hadn't yet gone to the gallows. There was a chance, and Joel darted to the door. But he hesitated for a moment to speak to Vallery.

"You understand all this?" he asked. "Will . . . will it make a difference. . . ?"

Her arms went around him again and her lips, brushing his, gave him the answer. "Nothing," she said, "can matter—except us."

And the warmth of her words dispelled some of the chill in his heart as he lurched

out of doors and ran down the street of Bannack, hobbling toward the gulch where death was being dealt this day. Yet he had to wonder if love could meet the test to come. Zach Armstrong had been exposed as a Road Agent. The Armstrong name was a soiled thing now. And that name was about all he had to offer Vallery. Could Bannack forget? Could Bannack accept one Armstrong and his bride-to-be when another Armstrong had fouled the name? Could Joel ask Vallery to share that shame?

Yet it was Zach who really crowded Joel's mind. He had to see his older brother, had to thank him again for the things Zach had done in other days, had to let Zach know that part of Joel would die this day as well. And those thoughts, pounding over and over again, lent him speed and brought him into a room packed with Vigilantes.

On the floor a man grovelled, loathsome in his abject cowardice as he begged for his life, begged for any sort of fate but the one that awaited him. And because, for a second, Joel thought it was Zach, his very soul sickened at the sight. Then he recognized that whining, cringing man—Henry Plummer! The man who had commanded the Road Agents, the man whose hands dripped with blood, was proving himself the most arrant coward of all at showdown!

But since Plummer was still alive, possibly Zach was also alive! The wild, searching glance of Joel brought Paris Pfouts to him.

"Steady, boy," the Vigilante president said kindly. "Huxley tried to plan it so you wouldn't be in on . . . on the finish. Every man of us is sorry, Joel. But we can't do things half-way."

"I know that—now," Joel said. "Could I see him? Could I have ten minutes with him?"

Pfouts nodded, swung a door and Joel stepped into a little log-walled room. The

door closed behind him. Zach arose from a bench.

AND now that they were face to face, brother and brother, Vigilante and Road Agent, Joel found no words. It was Zach, grinning feebly, who spoke first. "It must be hell for you, kid," he boomed. "But don't be takin' it hard. I got it comin', every bit of it."

Something stuck in Joel's throat and he had to force his words around it. "Oh Zach," he cried. "I didn't know—not for sure. I didn't think when I joined up with them that it would come to this. . . ."

"I know," the other said. "But they'd have got me anyway, sooner or later."

The big man, pacing nervously, came to an abrupt halt. "You-see, kid," he said "I threw in with the Road Agent bunch because I thought they were the brave ones and the rest were the rabbits. All my life, kid, I've cottoned to guts. . . . This is a helluva time for me to figger out that the ones that walk the straight way, the hard way, are the ones that's really got the guts. . . ."

"And you've got 'em, kid. Yeah, it was me you plugged on the road from Benton. You guessed it when you found I was wounded, didn't you? But I like 'em salty and I liked the way you stopped Satterlee. He's a skunk, kid, but I was in too deep before I found that out. . . ."

His words trailed away for there was a hush beyond the door. And Joel, sensing its portent, knew Plummer had finished his futile plea, gone to a rendezvous of no-return. The minutes were numbered now. It was time to say the last words. It was time to thank Zach for the things that belonged to yesterday. It was time for Joel to remember that he was a soldier and a Vigilante. But suddenly the only call that rang in his ears was the blood-call.

"Zach!" he cried desperately. "I'm armed and there are plenty of horses handy! We can make a run for it!"

Stark amazement spread across the other's blocky face. "You'd do that, kid?"

"Yes! Hurry!" Joel snapped.

"It will give you the Road Agent brand," Zach argued. "It will mean your neck if we're caught—and chances are we will be before we're ten feet past that door! Have you thought of that?"

For a moment Vallery's sweet face floated before Joel's vision but he banished it. "Yes," he said. "I've thought of all that. Come on!"

But the older man wasn't heading for the door. He was seating himself upon the bench, his face twitching as though powerful emotions raged within him. He shook his head.

"No!" he said. "I ain't letting you do it. Maybe Yeager had the right idea at the finish. Maybe the Head Vigilante in the Sky Court would remember if there was one good thing at the end to weigh against the rest. There's no need for you to try for me, kid. You see, *I ain't Zach Armstrong!* I'm Birch Kimbro, his partner. It's Zach that's dead and buried out at the claim!"

JOEL felt his knees grow rubbery beneath him. "You're lying!" he finally flung. "You're trying to make it easier for me!"

The big man on the bench shook his massive head again. "Before God, this is the truth. Zach was the one that died—and it wasn't an accident. I'd secretly joined the Road Agents and Satterlee planned the whole thing and did the killing. But rumors were going around that the Vigilantes were being formed. Both Zach and I were unknown in Bannack then. I figured that if the Vigilantes checked on us, they'd be less suspicious if they thought the *honest* partner was getting all the claim. Zach's record was good in California. Mine wasn't.

It was incredible. It was unbelievable.

But the feel of truth was in it. Doubt still tore at Joel and its sign must have shone in his eyes.

"I'd heard Zach talk of you often," the other went on. "I'd read letters you wrote him. It was plumb easy for me to pass myself off as him, even to you, for I knew you'd never met. But Satterlee knew that if I was going to keep on pretending to be your brother, I'd have to split the claim with you instead of with him. That's why he tried to kill you."

Joel looked across the room. There was truth in the things he'd heard and there was truth in the big man's face.

The door was opening and a ring of stern faces peered inside. Birch Kimbro arose. "I was low enough to rob my partner," he said. "But believe me, kid, I didn't know killing Zach was part of the plan. I was sorry about that—but it was too late. Will you shake, kid?"

Zach was dead. But Zach's name, the Armstrong name, was washed clean again. Thus there was sadness and a fierce joy in Joel's heart and those mingled emotions were tempered by a certain contrition

and gratitude to this big man. And the same thing that prompted Joel to wring the proffered hand sent him shouldering through the crowd afterwards, turning his back on the thing that was to transpire.

He passed the gallows where Plummer's body swayed but his eyes were blind to the sight of it though he was conscious of its significance. And, strangely enough, it came to him that this was Sunday, a Sabbath afterwards to be historic, January the tenth. Perhaps that is why his mind turned to a Man and a Cross and two thieves—one who denied redemption, one who reached for it.

In the grim month to come, Joel Armstrong would again ride with the Vigilantes, scouring the land, dealing out just retribution to the remnants of the Road Agent Band. Montana was to be clean again. Order was in the ascendancy now, making the land safe for those lowly people who asked only to wrest a home from the wilderness.

And now, facing his own destiny, Joel Armstrong bent his steps toward the cabin where Vallery waited. . . .

THE END

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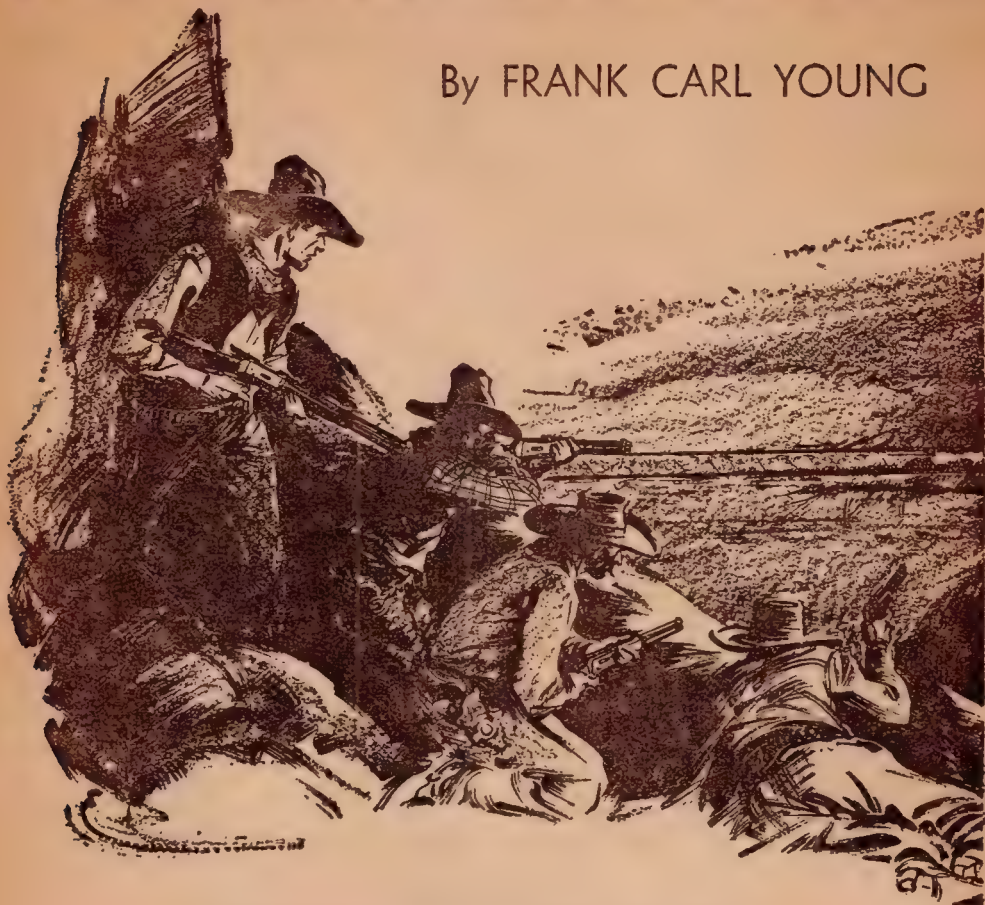
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Powdersmoke Dawn in Chaco

By FRANK CARL YOUNG



Six-guns roared, and men screamed with agony. . . .

There was only one way Marshal Bryan Holt could tame the gangs that held Chaco in murderous terror slavery — and that was to turn them against each other like two packs of mad dogs. But he hadn't counted on being caught between them on that bleak dawn when sixguns thundered death, and gunsmoke clouded the sun.

IT WAS late afternoon in the lawless cowtown of Chaco. In Tate Murray's barber shop on Centre Street, a brief row of colored bottles gleamingly reflected the slanting rays of the sun. Bryan Holt, just arrived in Chaco that morning, sat in one of the rickety chairs along the wall, waiting his turn.

Finishing with the only other customer in the place, the meek, little forty-year old

barber stepped aside to let the man rise from the chair. "That'll be a quarter for the shave, Dirk," said Tate timidly.

The man called Dirk lurched up on cruel-spurred boots. He was tall and built with the powerful proportions of a blacksmith, massive-headed and thick-necked, with vicious, red-flecked eyes.

"That'll be nothing!" he growled; turning, he grabbed his hat from the wall

hook. "You shave me free and like it!"

Tate Murray flushed with anger, but fear had too great a hold upon him to let him do much about it. Yet he reached out and caught Dirk's arm. "I've got to live, Dirk! I can't work for nothing. I want my pay—"

Dirk mouthed a curse and pulled his gun. "Damn you! Take your paw off me!" And he brought the barrel of his gun down glancingly on the side of the little barber's head.

Tate Murray grunted with pain and stumbled back. Dazed but not unconscious, he sank down on the floor. Dirk sheathed his gun and turned.

Bryan Holt, having silently watched it all, now rose slowly to his feet. "I think you better pay him, Mr. Dirk," he said with the calm serenity of a parson.

Dirk spun around. His narrowed eyes hotly appraised the big-boned, loose-limbed figure six paces away; took in the uncut hair that was as yellow as a lion's mane, the steady, cold-blue eyes that hinted of a hard, uncompromising nature and which were now cutting into him like keen-edged knives.

"Who are you?" demanded Dirk.

Holt kept staring back hard. "The man telling you to pay the barber."

"Make me!" roared Dirk; and he tensed his gun-hand above his holstered weapon, supremely confident.

From where he was slumped on the floor, Tate Murray stared with amazement at what followed. He saw the yellow-haired customer's right hand blur. The next instant it reappeared steady and wrapped around gleaming steel that spouted red flame.

With the roar of Holt's gun, Dirk's quickly drawn weapon flipped out of his fingers. Mouthing a curse, he clutched his bleeding forearm with his left hand and doubled with pain.

Holt leaped in close and snapped, "Turn around!"

After Dirk reluctantly obeyed, Holt buried his gun in his back and with his free hand dug into Dirk's pockets. A moment later Holt flipped a silver dollar toward Murray. Wide-eyed with awe, the barber reached out and caught it in mid-air.

"Never mind the change, Murray," said Holt. "Dirk feels right generous with his tips today."

"You'll pay for this, stranger!" snarled Dirk; and the next moment he found himself being propelled toward the door with Holt's gun-muzzle in his back, then helped to the sidewalk with the toe of Holt's dusty boot. A second later his gun came arcing out after him to clank at his feet.

THE sound of but one roaring gun was evidently of little consequence in Chaco. There was no hurry on the part of anyone to gather around the little barber shop. In fact, the only ones to show any concern at all were the few who happened to be passing. And to their questions, Dirk gave but curses and threats, then stalked off.

Inside the barber shop, Holt sheathed his gun, helped the incredulous barber to his feet.

"Think you can swing that razor and still leave most of my face where it is?" asked Holt, tossing his hat on the hook and dropping into the chair. "The name's Holt. Bryan Holt."

Murray exploded a pent-up breath, grabbed his tools and went to work. "Holt, this is probably the last shave you'll ever get," he said, shaking his head regretfully. "You're as good as a dead man right now. Know who that was?"

"Got an idea," replied Holt.

The barber said, "That was Dirk Regan, Lew Dalton's segundo. Mebbeso you don't know the set up in this town. It ain't pretty, I can tell you."

"So I've heard," answered Holt simply,

as his tanned, lean cheeks turned white with thick lather.

"Chaco is the worst, hell-doingest cow-burg in the state. A man's life ain't worth a white-chip here. Two men—skunks I call 'em—run it. The town's split in two parts, the railroad being the dividing line. Lew Dalton, who camps in his Longhorn saloon up the street, controls North Chaco. Riff Warnock handles South Chaco and operates from his gambling dive on the other side of the tracks. Between the two a man can't breathe without getting their permission. Lots of folks ain't liking it, but Dalton and Warnock got gun-crews that keep a man thinking their way if he wants to live."

"Nice place," mumbled Holt, as Murray's keen razor quit his jaws and chin and began on his neck.

"Take my advice, Holt," went on the barber, as he worked hurriedly. "Grab your bronc and go back to wherever you come from. Chaco ain't going to be a good roosting spot for you. Not after what you did to Dirk Regan. Lew Dalton will have every inch of your hide before you know it!"

Bryan Holt looked up at the little barber's worried face. "Sure, Tate." And he gave him a grateful grin for his concern.

Not many minutes later, Bryan Holt left the barber shop. Going to the hitch-rack, he mounted his bay-mare. Then, to the further astonishment and alarm of Tate Murray, he rode up Centre Street toward Lew Dalton's Longhorn saloon!

"He's either crazy or a one-man army!" gasped the barber.

BRYAN HOLT was neither crazy nor did he think himself an army. He was simply a man with a job. With a small army at his back, he knew he would stand a more likely chance of success, but they didn't hand out little armies where he came from—just orders.

Up Centre Street, three blocks from the railroad, was Lew Dalton's big saloon. Dismounting among the tethered mounts at the rack, Holt paused long enough to draw his gun and replace the spent shell with a fresh one. Then he sheathed it and went inside.

The place was crowded, noisy. A blue haze of tobacco smoke dimmed the features of those who turned and stared as he entered. Unconcerned, Holt quickly sought the man with whom he had business.

But first he noted the cluster of men and scantily clad percentage girls around a seated figure at the back of the saloon. It was Dirk Regan. Someone was bandaging his bullet-pierced forearm. Just then Regan looked up and saw him.

"There's the gent now!" he cried furiously.

Holt stood to one side of the door, kept the front wall close to his back, and waited. From the group around Regan came a tall, narrow-shouldered figure with slicked down black hair. Beady eyes that flashed from a lean, swart face drilled into Holt as the man moved deliberately toward him. Holt caught the glitter of a diamond ring on the man's long-fingered hand that swung closely to his tied-down gun.

It was Lew Dalton.

Dalton came to a halt several paces from Holt. "In this part of town I'm boss, stranger," came Dalton's thin, piercing voice. "Putting lead into friends of mine is something that I don't like!" He tensed himself, waited for the play he expected, and meant to force.

"Sure. I understand, Dalton."

Dalton blinked. "You know me? How come? Who are you?"

Holt appeared to be staring right at Dalton. But from the corners of his eyes he looked beyond, noted the lining up and spacing of five-six gun-shod henchmen near the end of the bar.

"The name's Bryan Holt, Dalton," he replied. "My boss happens to be the United States Federal Marshal of Arizona. He sent me up here to make a good little town out of this one. In other words, Dalton, I'm the Deputy Federal Marshal of Chaco, with headquarters at the Cattleman's Hotel."

Lew Dalton abruptly burst out with contemptuous laughter. "A tin-star in Chaco! What a joke!"

Holt looked quietly at the boss of North Chaco. "Sure, Dalton," he said softly. "I just dropped in to let you know that law and good behavior starts in Chaco tomorrow morning at sunrise. Reckon I better tell you, too, that Riff Warnock will no doubt help me get it started. Thought you'd like to know about that, Dalton."

The color drained instantly from Lew Dalton's gaunt features. His eyes suddenly narrowed and flamed, reflecting the turbulent racing of his shrewd and agile brain.

"Riff Warnock!" he cried. "You mean he's going to play in with you, back you? Why that dirty skunk! So it's come, has it? Wants the whole damn town, does he? Always guessed that. Wants to cut me down and take over behind a law-shield, eh? Well I'll fix that! And you can go back and tell him that, lawman!"

Marshal Holt calmly watched the infuriated features of the man before him. "Sure, Dalton," he replied evenly; and as he cautiously back-stepped to the door, he added: "Tonight's your last night to howl, so howl away. But remember—sun-up's the deadline." With a quick, backward movement, Holt was out on the saloon porch.

Infuriated, Lew Dalton went back to the cluster around Dirk Regan. Regan looked up at his boss and said: "He's all mine, get me? My arm's no good for quick Colt work, but I can work a shotgun fine."

MOUNTING his mare again, Marshal Holt rode down Centre Street. Crossing the railroad tracks into South Chaco, he drew up before Riff Warnock's Four Aces gambling dive.

That he was practically living on borrowed time was a fact definitely known to Holt. His mission in Chaco was a suicidal one. But that was the task given him by the Federal Marshal, and Holt had the peculiar habit of never saying "No, it can't be done."

Warnock's place was less noisy than Dalton's, but just as much of a blood-pit. Holt sensed that the moment he stepped inside. There was that tense, fatal feeling of being closed in upon without having a chance.

Unlike Dalton's the long bar was not the center of attraction, nor were the rouged girls in silks. In Riff Warnock's it was the green-baized tables that bloomed under kerosene lamps, the roulette wheels and chuck-a-luck cages. Here Lady Luck held court—or at least she was the inducement for the numerous suckers who heeded her insistent call. Only there was very little luck except bad to be found on Warnock's crooked tables.

Like Dalton's headquarters, the place was studded with gun-draped henchmen—half a dozen at least—and Holt easily picked them out. To his experienced eye, they were as easy to identify as the ace of spades. He guessed that Lew Dalton's armed servants must about equal Riff Warnock's—which made a handy force for keeping all Chaco in line.

"Swine are better fit to live," thought Holt with disgust.

Moving to the deserted angle of the bar nearest the door, Holt beckoned to the bald-headed barkeep. "Where's Riff Warnock?" he asked.

"Who wants to know?" demanded the other.

"The man asking you," purred Holt. The barkeep started a defiant oath, then

caught the icy glint in Holt's hard blue eyes. He jerked his thumb toward the back of the saloon. "In the office—door on the left."

Riff Warnock had most of the physical characteristics of a gorilla—beetle-browed flat, flaring-nostriled nose and a thrust out, granite jaw. Holt noticed that the moment he closed the office door behind him and leaned on it.

Warnock was seated before a desk on which were stacked trays of silver and gold and crisp bills—part of the day's 'take'. In a chair in the corner lounged one of his gun-dog's, a fuming cigarette dangling from his lips, his eyes now narrowed on Holt.

"Who let you in here?" came Warnock's booming voice, as he spun his massive body around in the chair.

"The law," answered Holt.

"The law!" Riff Warnock slapped his thigh, threw back his bushy-haired head and roared with laughter. "Hear that, Spike? The law! Why, there ain't any such animal in Chaco, Mister!"

"There is now, Warnock," said Holt. "There's a Deputy Federal Marshal in Chaco, and I'm him. Name's Holt. I'm here to pass you the word that starting at sun-up tomorrow morning Chaco is going to be a nice, quiet little town where bad boys got to behave."

Warnock poured himself a drink from a bottle on the edge of his desk. "And I suppose you're the little man whose going to do it all by himself, eh?" he boomed disdainfully.

"Not exactly," replied Holt, tensing himself as he saw Spike come slowly to his feet. "You see I'm expecting some assistance from Lew Dalton who bosses North Chaco. It seems that Dalton figures—"

"What!" Riff Warnock came lurching out of his chair, his loose jowls quivering, his beetle-browed eyes livid with rage. "Are you telling me that Lew Dalton's

throwing his guns in with yours?" He paused, seemed to answer his own question, and cursed. "Damnit! Of course he is! Why not? Get rid of me and my boys, and all Chaco is his! He'd like that, the doublecrossing rat! Well it won't work! You tell him that, badge-toter! Tell him nobody pushes Riff Warnock out of Chaco!"

"Sure—sure, Warnock." Marshal Holt reached his hand behind him, opened the door and started out. "Roar away. Tonight's your last night for it. At sunrise Chaco gets baptized with law."

"Sunrise be damned!" And Riff Warnock smashed his whiskey glass against the wall.

Holt threaded among the tables and left the saloon. There was nothing further to do now until dawn. . . .

DUSK had settled over Chaco by the time Holt stabled his mare at the local livery barn and had supper. Leaving the restaurant, he clumped up Centre Street, passed the shipping pens flanking the railroad, crossed the tracks and came to the Cattleman's Hotel where he had engaged a room that morning.

The room was on the second floor. The hallway was dark, but Holt remembered the right door. Unlocking it, he clanked inside and turned to close it again—

"Lift your paws, Holt, and keep your mouth shut!"

Holt jerked at the sound of the familiar voice. Twisting around, he saw Dirk Regan step from the deep shadows of a corner, a sawed-off shotgun thrust before him.

Holt said nothing as he lifted his hands. The faint half-light of dusk filled the room, but it was enough to catch the expression of triumph in Dirk's vicious, red-flecked eyes. Holt instantly guessed that the gunman had intimidated the desk clerk and taken the pass key.

As Dirk came forward, Holt said,

"Didn't expect company." He noticed that Dirk held the shortened gun with ease in his left hand; that he could move his bullet-pierced, bandaged right one, but only stiffly.

Dirk Regan took Holt's six-gun and threw it on the bureau. Then he prodded the marshal to a chair beside the open window where there was more light. Sitting down on another just opposite, he calmly crossed his legs and rested the shotgun on his knee.

"You're pretty smart, Holt," said Dirk. "I think you've fooled Dalton and Warnock, all right. But your set-up is plenty clear to me. I saw the same thing worked down in Sage City years ago."

Holt stared at the black mouth of the shot-gun gaping at his chest. "Is that right? Then why don't you pull that trigger?"

Dirk chuckled. "Too early for that. It would spoil things. Besides I want to thank you for the idea of playing Dalton and Warnock against each other to get both of them out of the way. You're actually going to make me king of Chaco, Holt. You see, I always wondered how to get Dalton and Warnock fighting each other so I could take over."

"I just guessed that myself," replied Holt, glancing out of the window.

Lights were appearing on Centre Street below. By squinting hard, he could just make out Tate Murray's barber shop a block north. In the other direction, at the corner of the hotel, the railroad tracks intersected the street, the rails now gleaming in the reflected street light.

Dirk noticed his interest outside. "Down there is where Dalton and Warnock will fight it out. I know Dalton and the boys are leaving his saloon just before sun-up and heading for Warnock's. I reckon Warnock will plan the same. They'll come together at the tracks. It'll be a good show, Holt, and we've got first class seats."

Holt rolled himself a cigarette, licked it tight and stared at Dirk. "That makes it right nice," he said with sharp sarcasm. "And I suppose when it's about over you'll finish me off, then go down and mop up the few left and declare yourself lord and master of all Chaco."

Dirk's eyes glittered like polished, blood-red jewels. "Correct. Which is exactly the same as your idea was, lawman."

Holt didn't reply. He could only think that the long night ahead would probably be his last.

For a moment his eyes wandered to Dirk's bandaged right arm resting on the sill of the open window. The dangling fingers at the end of it were close to the trigger of the shotgun angled across Dirk's crossed legs. Sucking in a deep breath, Holt slouched into a more comfortable position in the chair to wait for dawn—and a hoped for moment of relaxed vigilance on the part of the red-eyed killer.

BUT Dirk Regan was not the careless sort. Not with the leadership of all Chaco at stake. He was still seated there, wide awake and alert, when a pale dawn crept up out of the east.

Holt stirred in his chair, stretched. He stared at Dirk and met a pair of restless, expectant eyes. Each knew that the sun would be up within half an hour, bringing the showdown with it.

A hush, deeper and more tense than the natural one at daybreak, hung over Chaco. It seemed that the whole of Chaco was holding its breath, waiting.

Then it came—the faint tread of many feet, the feeble tinkle of spurs, and the creak of boot leather in the distance. Men were marching, coming from opposite directions in the street below.

And then Holt saw them.

From his right came Lew Dalton with five men. They were spread out, Dalton in the center and a little ahead. They walked slowly and grimly, eyes straight

ahead, their fists near low-tied holsters.

From the other direction, coming out of South Chaco, Holt saw the gorilla-like shape of Riff Warnock with six men at his back. Like Dalton's group, they were fanned out, moving slowly and deliberately, keyed to a high pitch, ready.

Holt held no sympathy for them—no more than he would have for two packs of wild dogs about to tear each other apart over a helpless, bleating lamb. This was Chaco's only chance for freedom from the vicious rule of gun-heeled human wolves.

Warnock and Dalton halted their men on either side of the railroad tracks—the boundary between north and south Chaco. The air bristled with tension, and Holt could plainly hear the excited breathing of Dirk behind him.

Suddenly the snarling voice of Lew Dalton rose to shatter the brief moment of silence: "With sunrise, Chaco is mine, Warnock!"

Riff Warnock roared back instantly, "You'll never see sunrise, you damn—!" And the boss of South Chaco slapped his hand to his gun and pulled it.

Hell broke loose before Holt's eyes. The dawn light in the street below was abruptly streaked with flame. Six-guns roared, window glass rattled, and men screamed with agony.

With an expressionless face, Holt watched gun-quick murderers murder each other; he saw killers pull steel and chop down on each other. Screeching curses of hate, the gun-rulers of Chaco kept drumming death into each other as they triggered out lead-cored streaks of flame from reeking guns.

Holt glanced at Dirk Regan. Dirk was bent over his gun, his features quivering with excitement, his red eyes gloating, jubilant, stamped with an insatiable hunger for power, and the knowledge that he would get that power soon.

Holt also noticed that the shotgun was still leveled at his midsection.

THE firing down below stopped almost as suddenly as it began. A thunderous hush followed, and Holt looked down upon the bloody scene. Dalton and Warnock were stretched across the railroad tracks, facing each other, their arms outstretched as if even in death they were still trying to reach the throat of the other. Behind, and to either side of them, some face down in the street, some on their backs in the gutter, lay their gunmen—dead or dying.

An exultant sigh gusted from Dirk Regan's lungs. "Well, it's over, lawman! And it's better than I thought! So here's yours—"

Dirk came to his feet eagerly, a diabolical grin smeared on his face. His left hand gripped the short barrel of the shotgun. All he needed to do was bring up his right hand, hook a finger on the trigger and squeezed. And Dirk tried to bring it up—but couldn't!

Dirk gasped with pain. His wounded right arm hung crooked and stiff from his shoulder, a thing of cramped, immovable agony! The chill night air blowing on it at the open window had turned the injured member into an unbending yard of bone and muscle!

Bryan Holt had counted on it. Through the long night hours he had thought of little else. And now, as Dirk Regan tried to flip up the short gun and work his left hand on the trigger, he leaped in fast.

He had but an instant's grace, but it was enough. Batting the raising muzzle down with one hand, he drove his other fist against Dirk's jaw, then leaped toward the bureau and his gun.

Dirk stumbled back, his shotgun still in his hand. Hitting the side of the bed with the back of his knees, he fell back on it. But it sprung him erect again to a sitting position.

"You ain't good enough, lawman—!" screamed Dirk.

Holt's fingers closed on his Colt on the

bureau and he spun around. At the same instant Dirk got the barrel of his shotgun rested on the bed's footboard, a finger of his left hand on the trigger. He squeezed.

Holt threw his body violently to one side and fired. The roar of his Colt blended with the terrific blast of the shotgun. The charge of shot hissed past and smashed the mirror in the bureau. But several pellets found Holt's cheek and ear.

The shotgun fell from Dirk's fingers and clanked to the floor. His eyes bulging with surprise and pain, Dirk tried to brace himself on the bed with his good arm. Then blood rushed into his mouth. His arm collapsed under him and he buried his face in the clean, white bed-sheet.

HOLT emerged from the hotel a few moments later. And the first man he spotted in the excited crowd conver-

ging on the scene, was Tate Murray.

The meek little barber rushed up to him and gasped. "Thank God! I thought maybe you were—" He gulped, twisted his head and looked at the lifeless forms in the street. "Did you do all that alone?"

Marshal Holt shook his head and stared thoughtfully through the brightening light of dawn. "No," he replied evenly, "Evil and greed did. Those two things most always destroy those who hold to them." Laying his hand on the barber's thin shoulder, he added, grinning, "So don't you try to corner the hair-shearing business. Tate."

Murray was very serious when he replied, "Not now that Chaco's got itself some law."

Holt lifted his head. The sun was just coming up over the low hills in the east. A new day was beginning for Chaco.

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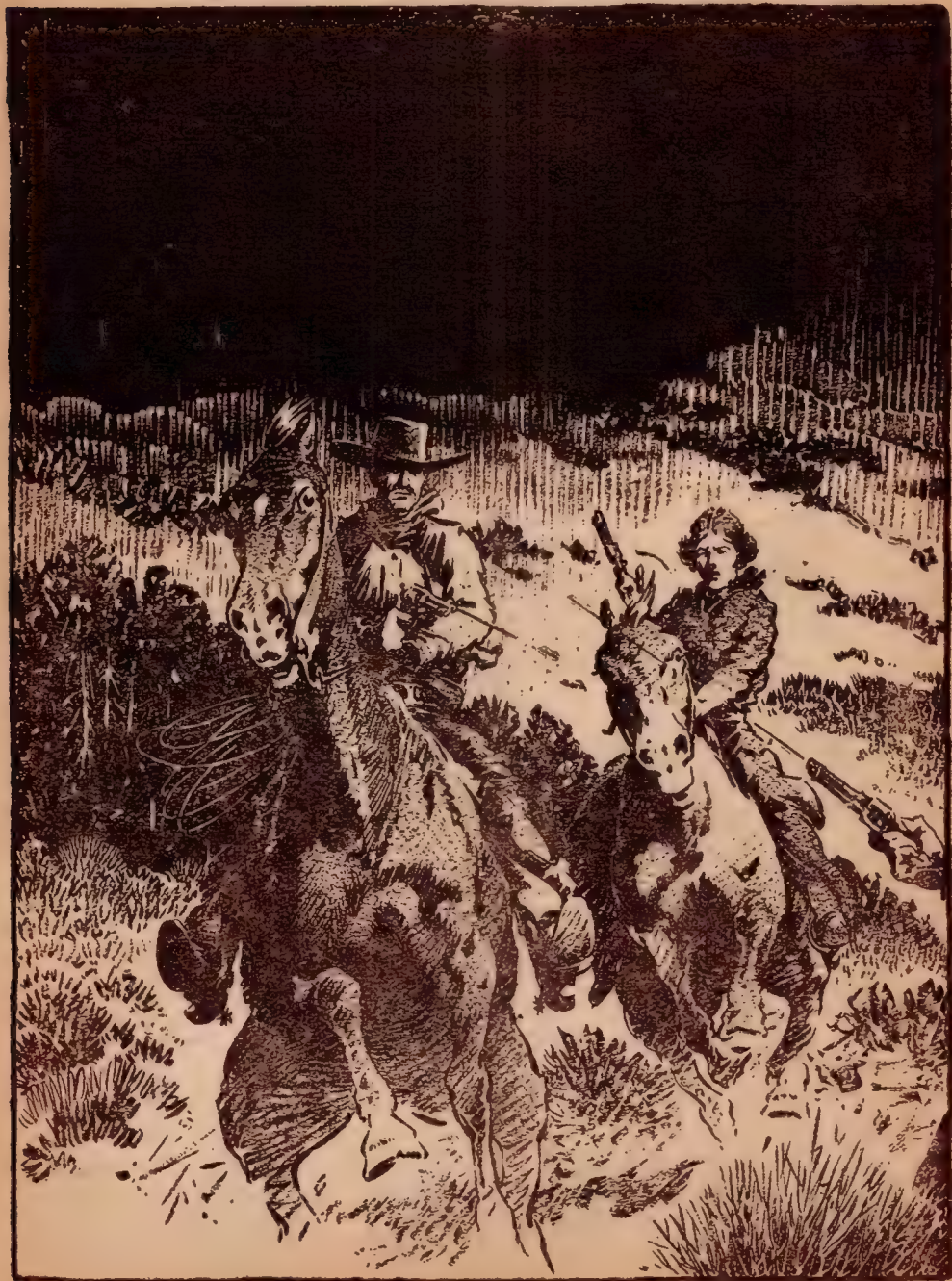
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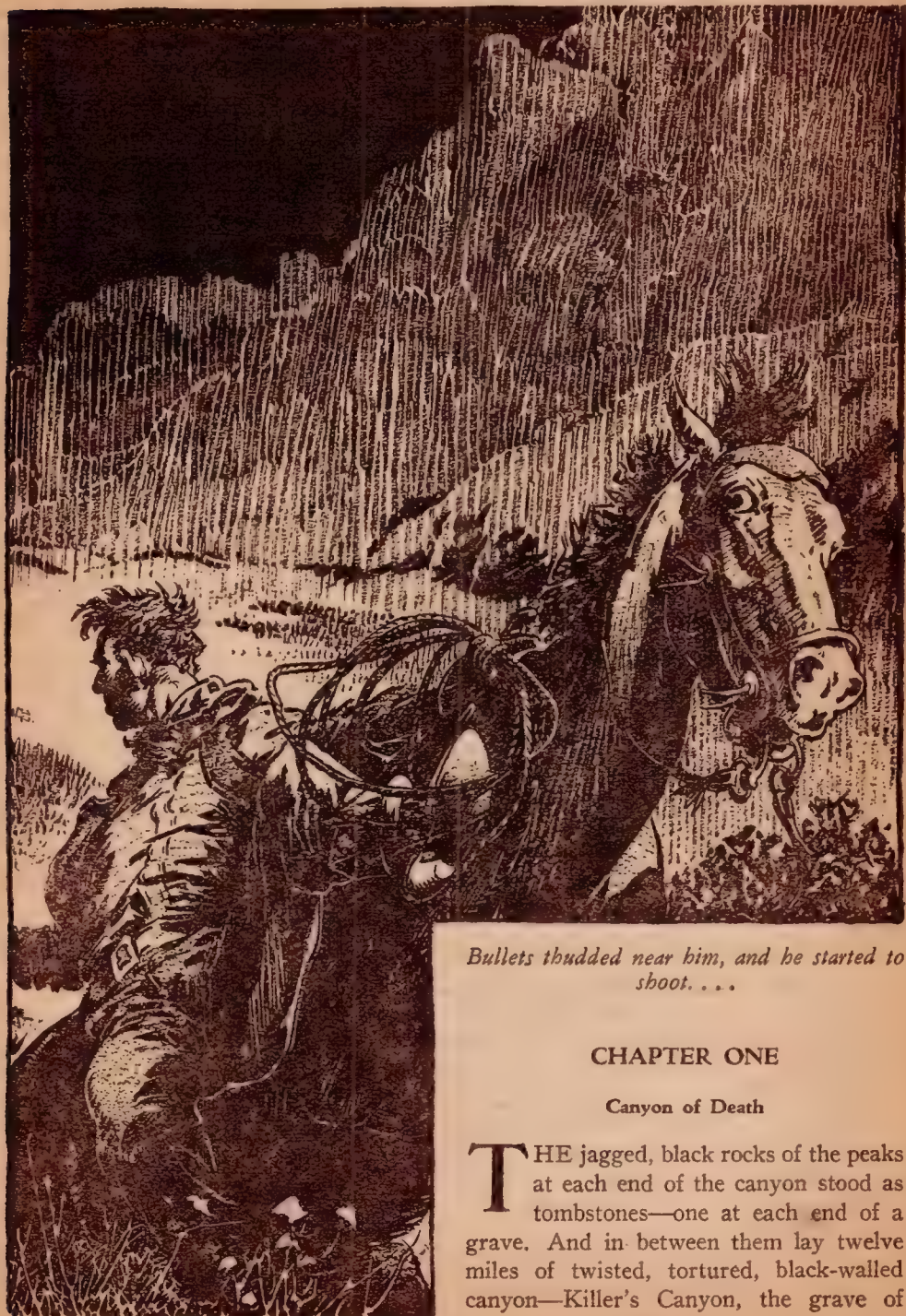
Hidden death lurked in the ghostly darkness of Killer's Canyon — that grim stronghold of murderous gold-thieves. But treachery lurked there, too, and it was treachery that sent Sheriff Art Thorburn into that sinister death trap, to trade bullets for gold with unseen killers . . . led by the woman he loved !



KILLER'S CANYON

By TOM J.
HOPKINS

Thrilling Outlaw Novelette



Bullets thudded near him, and he started to shoot. . . .

CHAPTER ONE

Canyon of Death

THE jagged, black rocks of the peaks at each end of the canyon stood as tombstones—one at each end of a grave. And in between them lay twelve miles of twisted, tortured, black-walled canyon—Killer's Canyon, the grave of

bullion-train guards. There, in shrouded gloom through most of the day twisted the sinuous, whispering waters of the river known as The Snake.

Art Thorburn rode out of the grim walls at the upper end of Killer's Canyon and sighed as he dragged in a lot of sunlit air. He turned in his well-worn saddle and looked back at the ugly black wall, a thousand feet high, which split his county in half. He had been in Snake county the better part of his life, had been sheriff for five years, but had never outgrown his intense distaste for that ugly ridge and the brooding, strange, somber canyon which split it.

He rolled a smoke in his lean, dark hands and lighted it on a thin sulphur match. His ears, keen to sound, heard the sibilant murmur of the river as it twisted and slid into the opening of the twelve mile canyon. It made his case-hardened nerves tighten, and he shivered a little—almost laughing at himself for it.

There he was, six feet of hard, toughened cowboy and rancher turned lawman. Thin-hipped, wide-shouldered; steady-eyed and cold-nerved. A fighting man who had battered his way to a place of standing, of high regard. Yet he shook his head and shivered again before he rode on toward Black Butte.

It was as though that black, somber, hissing canyon personified some unseen evil. The steady, sibilant whispers of the stream made it seem alive, something that had to be beaten down to death.

If the river had just bubbled and roared its way over some rocks, or boomed as it tumbled down over a falls . . . But, no. Just the high black walls, almost perpetually in shadow, and the strange, steady hissing and sighing of the Snake as it twisted its way down through the twelve miles beside the narrow wagon road. A living, breathing thing, it seemed to Art Thorburn, something that was waiting to crush him.

IT WAS one o'clock when Art Thorburn rode into Black Butte past the ugly twin dumps on either side of the canyon. There, on the right, was Matt Arlette's big Discovery mine, sprawling like a bloated spider up the hill. On the left, duplicating the hoists and buildings of the Discovery, was Con Trainer's Black Butte mine. And far up the twisting canyon that led to Black Butte itself, were the scars of abandoned claims.

As the sheriff rode past the two mines he caught the hammering, banging crash of the big stamps and crushers. There was the smell of wet mud in his sensitive nostrils as he rode past the sump where the tailings gathered in the canyon bottom, making an ugly, reddish-yellow blotch. A man standing on top of the high cyanide tanks called a greeting. Another waved from the cat-walk which led down along the outside of the Trainer mill.

Thorburn waved to the men, rode on at an ambling jog. His horse quickened pace a little as the land leveled off to what was the main—and only—street in the town of Black Butte. Miners' shacks, mostly tar-paper or tin, lined the rocky hillside. Three stores were bunched at one place, and across from them was the livery barn and feed yard.

The town was almost deserted for it was past the noon dinner hour, and the three o'clock shift had not yet come out of their shacks, blinking like gophers at the sharp sunlight before they dove into the shaft openings and tunnels. Thorburn stepped down from his horse at the feed yard and said: "H'yah, Jake? Grain him, will you? I'm headin' back to-night."

The limping livery man, nodded silently. He was old, grizzled, limping from Indian lead in his left leg. He had little to say, these days. He lived in the past, wondering why a man had to get old and crippled. Why in hell hadn't somebody

killed him, let him go out like a fighting man when he was worth a bullet?

Thorburn walked slantingly across the dusty street and called an idle greeting to the lonely storekeeper at the general store. He noted two bartenders swapping stories from their dooways. Then he turned into the lunchroom run by "Nick the Greek." It was empty of customers at that hour. He knew it would be. He had timed his arrival that way.

The lunchroom would be empty, and he could have Kate Monson to himself, feast his eyes on her smile.

His twin-gun rig was heavy on his waist as he sat down and slapped his dusty sombrero against his boot. He hung it on a chair back, and smiled at Kate's pretty face behind the counter. She smiled back, shyly. He was crazy to dream about it, he knew that. Hell, a man who was paid to wear a star, and took two guns and a short-barreled muley carbine with him wherever he went—what right had he to dream of a wife and a home?

He looked at Kate in her trim black dress touched off with white collar and cuffs. Her black hair was piled high and her bright blue eyes lightened as her full, kissable lips smiled at him. Well, he had her alone for the time. Then three huge miners barged in before he could even say hello!

They were big men, powerfully built, black and rough looking. None of them carried a gun, and all three were dressed in the mudstained overalls and wide heeled boots which stamped them as miners. They stormed in loudly, banging things around, not bothering to take off their caps.

ART THORBURN swore under his breath and registered them mentally as the Souter brothers. They owned a no-good claim high up on the ridge near the jagged peak that gave the mining dis-

trict its name. A tough bunch, bad babies in any man's talk.

"Hy, Sweetie-pie!" Jake Souter bawled the words and grabbed with a dirty hand at Kate Monson. "How about a kiss for a big minin' man, huh?"

His brothers roared with laughter as the big fellow grabbed Kate and kissed her. The glass of water Kate had been carrying hit the floor—and the big miner followed it with a dull crash. Kate screamed once, then jumped swiftly back against the wall, to be out of the way.

Art Thorburn had come to his feet in a puma-like leap. He clubbed his right fist and hit straight at the dirty, tobacco-stained mouth which had just been pressed against Kate's pretty lips. And all that had been surging within him for weeks went with that punch. All the mental turmoil of a man who was up against something he neither could understand nor fight. All the love he had held back went out now in that blow!

Jake Souter went down with a crash and stayed there. His brothers, Bruno and Pete, came in with a roar. They were met with a low swinging chair that tripped them both. They crashed down, cursing softly. Bruno came up, his face bleeding from where he had smashed his nose on the hard wood. He jumped at Thorburn, wildly swinging his huge hands.

Thorburn stepped in, his jaw tightened grimly as he hit twice. Bruno went down with a thud, and sat there weaving groggily. Jake got up shaking his head. Bruno and Pete came to their feet. Thorburn stood poised, his hands near his guns.

"Get out, you scum." He spoke with a flat tone in his voice. It was the voice of the law, coming from a cool, heady fighting man. Seven hundred pounds of angry, hard miners didn't even make him breathe hard. He just stood there, cool, alert, giving his orders.

"You're a hell of a lawman," snorted

Jake Souter, hotly. "Why ain't you out after the Ghosts of Killer's Canyon? That's your job, ain't it? We all pay you to be the law—well, be it! Get them fellers that's stole our gold from us!"

"That's what I'm up here for, to talk things over the Arlette and Trainer—not that it's any of your business." Thorburn spoke on, coldly: "I'm the law. I run my job as I please. Neither you nor anyone else will tell me how to get the Ghosts of Killer's Canyon. Nor manhandle a decent girl while I'm around—*get out!*"

CHAPTER TWO

Lawman's Betrayal

HAD Art Thorburn given the thing a little more thought he might have wondered why those three men walked out so quietly. They were a tough, man-breaking, hell-raising crew, those Souters. Not the kind to back down before a tin star, nor a pair of guns. But Thorburn had whirled suddenly as the men went out. He looked at Kate, pressed against the wall and staring at him, wide-eyed. He looked, read something there, and suddenly had her in his arms. She was afraid—for him!

Outside, in the dusty street, the Souters walked off. They looked back once and saw Thorburn standing with Kate in his arms. They grinned wickedly, and Jake said in a low voice: "It worked, boys, it worked!"

They walked on, loafing along now, it was an hour or more before they went on shift at the Discovery. . . .

Kate was trying to pull her fiery lips, her slim body away from Thorburn. He let her get just a few inches back, but kept his big hands locked around her slim waist. He smiled down, his dark brown eyes seeing deep into her heart.

"It's no use," he said softly. "I've known it since I first saw you, two months ago. I've felt it growing all the time,

whenever I had a chance to think of you, my dear. And that was often. Your mine, nothing can change that. You're a fool to marry a gun-totting lawman who may get killed in the next ten seconds. But, you're going to do it!"

She was twisting her body a little, moving her head away from his seeking lips. She shivered and said: "No, no—Art—not that. I didn't—I can't. It's not in the cards, darling."

He laughed softly, and found her lips. Then he said: "Tell Nick you're leaving in an hour. Get packed, and we'll ride down together. I'll see Arlette and Trainer, and meet you at the feed barns in just one hour. We can reach the county seat before it's too late, and get married tonight."

"But—you don't know who I am, or anything about me!"

He laughed, let go of her, and walked toward the door. He looked back and said: "One hour, my dear! I love you!"

She watched him go and then started suddenly. Nick the Greek's thick voice said: "I heard. You're a fine girl, I hate to lose you."

She moistened her pretty, kissable lips. Her tiny fingers were shaking a little as she loosened the apron strings. She was saying to herself, in a dull, sick thought: "Am I mad? Am I stark, staring mad?"

IT WAS five o'clock when they rode into the jagged maw of Killer's Canyon. The slanting rays of the sun hit them in the back, warmed them. And then the cold mouth, the chill wind, seemed to suck them in.

Kate rode close to him, on the rented saddler. The rented pack horse that carried her few belongings hammered behind them. The pack horse closed up the space and trotted along, nudging the rumps of the two saddlers. Normally, either one of the ridden horses would have lashed back with shod hooves at the

crowding horse. Now, all three seemed to hover together in the darkness.

It was dark in there, now. Getting blacker, blacker all the time.

"I shouldn't do this," came the tormented whisper from the girl's lips. "I've got to tell you things, Art dear; listen—"

He leaned over and kissed her. He held her hand, felt her warm knee pressed against him as they rode so close together and the horses kept crowding in. He said: "I'm a tough fighting man that came out of this rough, hard country. I live by my guns, my ability to out-guess, out-fight, out-draw, any man or combination of men I meet. That can't go on forever. I know it. I've got one job to do. Get the Ghosts of Killer's Canyon and put them where they can't do things any more. Then, it's a ranch for us, Honey."

She shivered, said: "But I must tell you—"

He grinned in the darkness and spoke to divert her. "This canyon got its name way back in the past. A prospecting party got killed in here by the Indians. Then, when the Black Butte country began to show color, they burro-ed the gold and supplies in and out this hell canyon. High-jackers raided the burro trains and stole the gold. Lots of guards got killed, but finally they got the high-jackers. My daddy was in the posse, helped to hang the thieves and murderers. Then Killer's Canyon was safe up to three years back when trouble started again after they found paying ore instead of placer."

She squeezed his hand, helplessly, and said: "Won't you let me tell you—?"

He interrupted again. "Now, the gun-ghosts of the old Killer's Canyon raiders are back. I'll get 'em, my dear, it's a promise. Then—" He kissed her, and she gave up helplessly to his love.

She rode along with him, in that black place of hissing waters. They were both silent.

They came out of the hissing canyon, where the grim surge of the Snake boiled out into the open. A mile from the entrance they neared Burro Flats, where the pack trains used to stop after and before the canyon trip. A light glowed there from Crazy Jennie's place, a log cabin of bad repute. Crazy Jennie was an ageless old man with a bleating, high-pitched voice that came strangely from his heavily bearded face which topped a huge, powerful body.

Beyond Crazy Jennie's they could see the patch of lights that was the county seat, ten miles away. There was a tilted moon in the sky, and after the blackness of the canyon it seemed almost bright. Bright enough to see some horses standing shot-hipped before the log cabin of the road house.

As they neared the place there was a sudden curse, a shouted series of unintelligible words. A gun crashed heavily, three times, and the whine of the lead passed within inches of Art Thorburn!

HE SOCKED spurs into his horse and raced the forty yards to the front door. There, as his horse skidded to a dirt-shoving stop, Thorburn hit the ground and called: "It's the law, boys!"

He hit the closed door with a wide shoulder and surged into the room.

Crazy Jennie was standing like a bloated image behind his four foot bar. Three miners, evidently from Black Butte, stood with open mouths, staring at the big lawman.

"That row was staged," Thorburn said flatly. "Those shots were too close to me to be chance. Who did that shooting?"

"It came from outside," said Crazy Jennie in his bleating, effeminate voice. "Don't git your dander up, you young cockalorum. Don't come bargain' into my place, with your guns itching to kill. I run a respectable joint, I'll have you know!"

Thorburn walked over to the huge man, and his face was like a mask. He rammed his gun muzzles into the fat belly of Crazy Jennie and said quietly: "Talk, you son. You was here when the old burro-raiding gang of Killer's Canyon was working. Talk!" He jammed the guns into the fat belly again. He clicked the hammers up and down with his thumbs as though itching to let go of them. "Talk, fella, talk fast. This looks like hell, to me. I been up investigating these bullion robberies, and somebody pot-shots around my ears on the way home. Who fired those shots?"

Crazy Jennie bleated angrily, and swore angry, frightened oaths. Then he said: "I'll leave it to the boys, here. I was tellin' them they couldn't have no more lick without money. I yelled it, and then the shots went off from that room there."

He pointed to the leanto which was the kitchen. Thorburn went in and sniffed; yes, there was the smell of burned powder in the room. He opened the door and looked out over sage-brush flats that showed him nothing out of the usual. He went back grimly into the front room and holstered his guns. Kate was standing in the doorway, and there was a short-barreled Colt .38 in her hand. She held it as if she had held a gun many times in the past.

Thorburn grinned and walked to her side: "You'll make a good lawman's wife, Kate!" He turned back to face the others and said, stiffly: "Tell your ambushing friend that I'll get the gold through safely. Tell him I'd like to meet him, in the open. Nothing pleases me more than a chance to pump lead at a dirty son who shoots from the dark."

"You got us wrong," Crazy Jennie bleated, angrily: "We ain't mixed into no high-jackers' gang."

Thorburn ignored this, and walked out with Kate by his side. Outside, as they got the horses again, he said: "You see,

I told you you'd be a fool to marry a lawman, but you're going to, aren't you?"

"I—" she stopped helplessly as he swung her up into the saddle.

He laughed:

"I knew you would, darling."

CHAPTER THREE

Gold for Treachery

THEY were married that night and by noon of the next day it seemed as if half the county was heading toward Sawtooth, the county seat. Rigs and wagons and horsebackers came across the sage flats, the lava benches, and down from the cedar breaks of the ranch and mining country. By nightfall Sawtooth was in an uproar of celebration over the marriage of the most popular lawman that part of Idaho had ever known.

Sawtooth was a ragged looking town; a strange mixture that showed its history in its face. Rude frame buildings, sod huts, shacks made of lava blocks, and some finely built homes, with a good cut-stone county building . . . There it was—a frontier trading post which had gone through the gold boom, the saw-mill session, cattle, and was now a thriving little place celebrating a wedding!

By sunset it seemed that everybody was boiling in and out of and around the small frame cottage where Art Thorburn and his bride were grinning happily at all of them. Every chair was occupied by somebody, laughing, joking.

There was grub and fixings going on in the kitchen and dining room. There were drinks for all who wanted them, ranging from lemonade to straight rye or bourbon. And if there still lingered any doubt in pretty Kate's mind about what she had done, there was no sign of it in her radiant face.

The ranchers, miners, cowboys and cattlemen all looked at her and swore softly in admiration. As Old Peavy Bill, a log-

ger turned blacksmith, said: "The lucky son! An' the so-an'-so who says he don't deserve it, fights me!"

Kate heard it and laughed, and then a slow dropping mask seemed to sweep over her face. She was standing near the rude table where newcomers dropped their gifts, and it was piled with a strange assortment of things. Presents—little nic-nacks cherished by families through the wagon-train and pioneering days; things from the store to be used in housekeeping . . . She slid the mask up again and smiled at her big husband. He said, a little grimly: "I saw that look, and know why. But I don't think they'll make trouble, honey!"

He stepped forward two steps, toward the door. He wanted to get just beyond her in case there was trouble, here at their party. But Kate stepped up beside him. *For better, for worse*, she said mutely to herself. *It was a mad thing to do, Kate, you fool; but you've done it. For better, for worse—God help you!*

"Howdy, folks."

It was Jake Souter, all shaved and dressed up in his store clothes. He grinned and jerked his big neck around in the tight collar that was choking him. Bruno and Peter Souter echoed the greeting and the choked grins. They wiggled around a little, like schoolboys ashamed of themselves.

Then, as though forcing himself to do it through sheer shame, Jake said: "Missy, I'm sorry I made a horned fool out o' myself. Let's be friends, an' just say I kissed the bride to soon!"

He put out a pawlike hand, washed, but grit-stained from years of mining. Kate took it and let go of it hurriedly. The Souters, one by one, shook hands with her and with Thorburn. They grinned, moved off into the noisy crowd, and the thing passed over quietly.

It was over an hour later when confused sounds came into the chatter inside

the house. Words, the pounding of a running horse. Some excited shouting and then: "Bring him in here, the doc's there—easy—don't shake him up, you fool—"

THORBURN moved automatically to the door, Kate by his side. It seemed the fragile girl could not leave this big lawman she had married for even a moment. Through the door came two big men, Peavy Bill, and Jem Norton, a stage driver. They were half-carrying a blood-stained, sagging man.

"Matt Arlette! Good Lord, man, you didn't try to bring out that bullion today—!"

The silence that shut down was like a shroud. Arlette twisted loose from the men who held him, took a staggering step forward. He caught blindly at Thorburn's quick-moving hands and said thickly: "Three dead guards. Killer's Canyon—like ghosts—" And he fell flatly forward.

Thorburn eased Arlette down to the floor gently. He knelt swiftly, and a sick sensation swept over him. His hands clenched, unclenched, and then gentle fingers closed the lids of Arlette's staring eyes. He rose, looked at Doc Wilson who was just stooping, and then at the others.

"We been celebrating and having a good time while the ghosts of Killer's Canyon shot four men!" he said.

A growling sound went through the crowd. Peavy Bill and Jem Norton looked at each other and nodded slowly. Their faces were grim, cold. Older men, they remembered the old gang of murderous robbers who had given Killer's Canyon its ghastly reputation. This thing was not going to be easy, you could read in their faces and tight lips. Jake Gilfoyle, the limping liveryman from Black Butte growled something that sounded like: "Chance to die in a good cause."

Doc Wilson and two others were grimly lifting Arlette's big body onto a sofa.

Thorburn's eyes shifted about swiftly. He saw the three Souter brothers standing shoulder to shoulder. Something stirred suddenly in his brain. He noted they were armed, under their jackets. Noted too, that they stood close to a big wide window out onto a porch. Their deep set eyes were on him, steady and cold, but there was nothing to be read in their hard faces.

And then Thorburn's lips went white with sudden strain, and his voice cracked a little as he blurted, "Look there—on the table, with the wedding presents!"

Every pair of eyes in that room followed his fascinated stare—except, as he remembered later, the Souters. On the table, set on top of the many wedding presents, was a small canvas sack. A sack such as used by prospectors for sampling ledges—and for carrying small quantities of bullion!

Two long strides carried the grim-faced sheriff to the table, and Kate was a close second. She crowded against him as both reached for the sack, all eyes on them now. Thorburn felt her shivering, and whispered, softly: "Steady, honey."

He picked up the sack and hefted it. It weighed about ten pounds and at current prices was then worth close to three thousand dollars. He put it down, looked at the Souter boys. Their faces were blank. Thorburn said, his voice ringing clear like a bell: "I'd like to know who left that! Is it loot from the robbery tonight? Is anybody in this county crazy enough to think they can buy me off?"

HIS hands clenched suddenly and he walked over to the Souters. He stood facing them down, his eyes hot and angry.

"I don't know why, but I think you had something to do with this! Are you trying to make people think I'm in with those dirty, murdering thieves?"

Jake Souter spoke gruffly: "We'd have

only two reasons for doing that: because we fought you yes'day, an' because we're the robbers. We done apologized for the first, and as for the other—how in hell could we have robbed Arlette when we was here?"

A mutter went through the crowd, but Thorburn snapped at them: "It's midnight now. You got here at ten. It was dark in the canyon at six. Hell, you could have done it and reached here easy ahead of Arlette! And that bullion sack—!"

He stiffened, put both hands on his guns and said: "I think I'll jail you three!"

"You can't—without proof of some sort!"

A sudden wave of helplessness swept over Art Thorburn. Always a fair man, that fairness came over him now. Actually, he had nothing on the Souters. Was he still sore at that kiss, yesterday? Was that back of his sudden flare of rage at them?

"Come on, who's with me? I'm riding for the ghosts of Killer's Canyon!" He started swiftly for the door. Suddenly he became aware of Kate close to him. He leaned over, smiled swiftly as he kissed her and said: "You would marry a lawman! But I didn't think things would break so fast, honey girl."

She kissed him again. "God keep you safe—all of you!" she said.

Twenty men rode out behind the tall sheriff. Grim, hard eyed men; fighting men, heavily armed. They rode straight for Killer's Canyon. It was just after midnight when they left Sawtooth, and it was late afternoon when they returned. They had three bodies with them to add to Matt Arlette's in the room back of Doc Wilson's office.

Kate met them, running out into the dusty street to walk beside her tired husband on his more tired horse. She caught his arm as he stepped down and kissed

her. Her lips were white and taut, and her eyes asked a wild, muted question. Thorburn answered it, slowly: "Not a sign. Not a footprint, a track of any kind. They disappeared in the canyon—like ghosts!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Ghost Lead

THORBURN and Kate walked slowly along, feet plodding in the dust of the street. People surged out from the buildings and stopped short as they noted Thorburn's grim face and the strange, almost frightened look on Kate's. They turned to the others with their questions, and soon got the same story Kate was hearing from her big lawman husband:

"We combed every foot of the canyon. If there's any way out of it except through the gorge openings themselves, I can't find it!"

He talked on, as they moved toward their home, told her of the place a mile and a half into the canyon where the bodies had been found; of finding ejected shells there, where the murderers had reloaded before taking the bullion from the dead pack horse.

"Nobody seems to know, at the Discovery mill, just how much Arlette took out. Or why he didn't wait, until Trainer was ready to ship also. He told me he would—maybe he figured our shivaree would be a good chance to slip it out safely."

The posse broke up and scattered to their homes. Kate followed her big husband to the doctor's office, and waited while he signed some papers about the dead men. Then, they walked home, together. She shivered once or twice, but forced a smile as he said, "Now, don't you worry, honey girl. No danged ghosts can whip me, while I got you around!"

"Art, I—"

He patted her hand again, not realizing

he interrupted something she was trying to tell him. "I'll get 'em! I'll get those ambushing, murdering sons if it's the last thing I do—"

THE days passed slowly, but happily, for the newlyweds. If anyone noticed the strained, almost frightened look that came onto Kate's face at times, it was not her big lawman husband. He was too enthralled with her, to note anything except that she was his. And his head, at other times, was filled with schemes for trapping the mysterious Ghosts of Killer's Canyon.

Doc Wilson's wife, however, a motherly woman with graying hair, noted the strained look. She spoke of it to others, and the word went around slowly that Kate frightened. Not used to being a lawman's wife, they said, worrying about him getting killed. Who was she? Nobody knew. Nick the Greek said she had come in on a stage, three months back, and he had hired her. And that was all anybody knew about her. Probably from some peaceful country, where bullets didn't fly so thick, and there were no Ghosts of Killer's Canyon to make a lawman's life so dangerous, the gossipy women declared.

And so the thing stood for two more weeks. Then one day, a man came in from Black Butte. He bought a few drinks, mentioned casually in front of the bar at the Gold Dollar that he had quit his job at Trainer's mill. Art Thorburn was there, talking to Peavy Bill when the man said that.

Art Thorburn went home, at supper time, and ate quietly, smiling at Kate from time to time. Then he kissed her, after supper, and moved to the door without offering to help with the dishes as he always did. She shivered a little. "You're not going—now—"

He nodded. "Yes. Trainer's man came through at noon. He and Trainer and I

are the only ones that know. His voice was soft, low. "It's tomorrow. Thirty-five thousand coming out. A nice haul for the Ghosts of Killer's Canyon—if they get it!"

"Do you—do you have to go?"

She clung to him like a child, shivering and frightened. Suddenly, as his big hand pushed her head back so he could look into her pretty eyes, she smiled brokenly. "Of course you do. And God will bring you back safe."

"You're a game kid," he said, as he kissed her goodbye. "Don't you worry about me—it's the Ghosts of Killer's Canyon that should do the worrying! I've set a sweet trap for them!"

IT WAS about three in the morning when Art Thorburn stepped down from his horse in front of Crazy Jennie's dive near the lower entrance of the Canyon.

A lamp burned in the front window, and beside it Thorburn could see the great, hulking figure of the bleating-voiced old man. As the lawman strode up to the door and kicked it open, he thought back over all those years he had spent in that county, and realized that he never had seen Crazy Jennie's place, day or night, that the old man was not there to serve any chance customer.

"Huh, you, is it?"

Crazy Jennie bleated angrily. His high pitched voice sounded crazily from his huge, hulking body—bleating out through his heavily bearded face like something in a nightmare.

"Yeah, but it ain't a drink I want. I just wanted to tell you," said Art Thorburn, evenly, "Trainer is bringing out his bullion at dawn, today."

"I—you, ain't—?" The huge man stutted uncertainly.

"I thought so!" Thorburn laughed openly. "You are in with them! Who is it, Jennie? Who's taken the place of the

old gang, and doing all this murdering and robbing?"

Crazy Jennie's hand went down under his small bar. Thorburn jumped half across the bar and swung with his drawn gun. Crazy Jennie jerked his great head, cursing crazily in his high-pitched voice as the gun barrel slashed him viciously and drove him back from his own hidden weapon.

Thorburn dove around the bar, slugging hard with his left hand. He hit Crazy Jennie four times and then the huge man surged forward like an enraged elephant. His great clubbed hands hammered terrible blows at the lawman. Thorburn got one he could not duck, and went reeling across the room to smash against the far wall. It made his head spin wildly, and the world was a place of sparks, shooting streaks of light, and spitting flashes of color.

Through it, he saw the huge, elephant-like figure of Crazy Jennie coming at him. The big man's hands were clubbed for murder. His face was twisted terribly above his beard and his voice shrilled foul, venomous curses.

Thorburn ducked two punches, put all he had in one wild swing of his gun barrel. He wanted Crazy Jennie alive. The blow landed and the huge man sagged horribly, then fell against Thorburn. Both went down with a dull thudding sound as the door burst open and four men barged in.

Throwing the limp body of the huge man aside, Thorburn came to his feet and said: "There he is boys. Watch him close an' don't let him get a word of warning out. Stay here, search this place as well as you can. An hour after sunrise, remember, you ride straight to the lower end of the canyon!"

Peavy Bill, Jem Norton, Cal Woodrum the cobbler, and Dewlap Martin nodded. Martin, who had worked cattle on the old Thorburn range before the sheriff's dad

had died, said: "Art, you're crazier than Jennie, here. You can't go through that damn, murderer's canyon alone with that gold! They'll get you, Art, get you sure as hell. Remember, we've packed more'n one dead man out of that Killer's Canyon!"

"It's my job to take the bullion through, and not let any more people get killed! It's your job to block this end of the gorge. Trainer's with his men to block the other. Don't let anybody in or out of that canyon."

They growled assent. That was the plan: Trainer and his men were to block off the upper end, while Peavy Bill and the others blocked the lower. Thorburn was to take the pack horse through the canyon alone, risking his life. Certain death, it would seem, lay before him. They had argued all the way up from Sawtooth, argued and cursed him without avail. Thorburn's angle had been: "There's been enough men murdered. You pay me to keep the law. I'm doin' this job alone!"

AT DAWN, Thorburn met Trainer and four men at the upper end of Killers' Canyon. Trainer was a tall, gaunt man with a walrus mustache. He looked more like a minister than a hard-bitten, hard-rock miner. But no man in all the mining country was better at single-jacking, or timbering a dangerous drift or stope, than Trainer himself. That his Black Butte claim could ship thirty-five thousand dollars in "buttons" at one time meant nothing to him; he was still a miner at heart and worked side by side with his men. So it was he that said: "It's my job, laddie, to take that gold through the canyon, not yours."

But the grim-jawed look on the lawman's face stopped his protests. Five minutes later, Art Thorburn was riding into the black maw of the canyon, pushing the heavy-burdened horse ahead of him. One

hundred and fifty pounds of gold—twenty dollars an ounce—thirty-five thousand in any man's language or money. . . .

The Snake hissed and twisted and surged alongside the narrow, winding road. The place seemed to have sucked horses and rider into its whispering, winding place of death. The tortuous, dark canyon grew darker as the walls rose higher and higher. Art Thorburn thought over the whole plan. It should be perfect. There was no way out of that canyon except at the ends, all men had agreed. Not even an experienced climber could have made it on foot. Sheer walls and small, badly broken up fragments offered no footing. Hell, thought Thorburn, a big-horn sheep couldn't get up anywhere!

One of two things was certain. Either he got the gold through this time, or the Ghosts of Killer's Canyon would be trapped in there . . . after killing him. He tried not to think, as he rode along, of the three bodies he had found after the last raid of the Ghosts. He tried not to think of all the others he had carted out of that horrible canyon. And most of all, he tried not to think of Kate, alone, if he died. . . .

The river, sinuous, twisting, whispering like the snake it had been named for, boiled down past the road. The black walls, dank and forbidding, lay about him. As the canyon twisted and turned down through the black rocks, it was never possible to see more than a hundred yards ahead. But between those grim walls was the hissing, surging Snake river . . . and memories. Here, the first bodies had been found thirty years back. There, two shot-gun guards had died gamely—and vainly. A mile ahead . . . he fought against the thoughts. When would his death shot come hurtling out at him without warning? At what spot was he to die?

Just the hissing of the water, the clicking of the shod hoofs of the horses. And then, horribly, something like a great hand

began to throttle out Art Thorburn's life!

Both hands went up in a wild gesture as he grabbed and fought vainly at the biting noose which had been dropped over his head. He had not heard a sound from the hissing rope, for the Snake's hissing had drowned it. Now, gasping, choking, fighting like mad, he was being dragged from his horse. The world was black. Something seemed to bounce up and strike his head, his falling, struggling body. The hissing became a wild roaring sound that seemed to burst his brain. . . .

He was trying to tell himself that it was all right to die, as long as they caught the Ghosts. . . .

CHAPTER FIVE

Murder Gossip

THEY found Art Thorburn at almost the exact center of Killer's Canyon. He was lying beside the narrow road; the waters of the Snake hissed past him. The rope burn was livid around his neck, but the rope was gone. There were two short ropes, carelessly knotted about his arms and legs. He was still alive.

Thorburn came awake slowly to the mutter of hard, angry voices and the cold feeling of water on his face. His head ached, and his neck still burned, but he said, thickly: "You got 'em! You got . . . the Ghosts—"

He stopped short, tried to get to his feet, and went staggering around in a crazy circle, almost falling into the river. He pulled himself together, looked at each and every man in one swift-circling glance. Trainer and his men, Peavy Bill and the others from Sawtooth—and no one else.

"You—fools! God, you let them get away!"

Trainers' voice was hard, cold. "They tricked us. You'd been gone about an hour when we heard a yell from the canyon that you had 'em down here an' was

shootin' it out with 'em. We naturally rode in, hell bent. An' after we rode in—well, I reckon the Ghosts rode out without hindrance!"

Thorburn stood still, his face a mask. Evidently, the Ghosts had robbed him, tied him, and ridden back to hide themselves near the upper end of the canyon. Then, they tricked Trainer and his men in very neatly—and made a safe flight!

"Yeah," said Trainer, grimly! "That's what they did. Funny, leavin' you alive, when they always killed the guards before. Funny, it seems like they knew the trap!"

Thorburn's guns flashed out. "Damn you, Trainer, I'll kill you for that!"

"Not now," Trainer said, grimly. "Get the Ghosts, first. Get our bullion back. After that—not before—come an' try to kill me!"

He turned and rode off with his men.

IN A week the whole county was seething with what Trainer had hinted at so openly. Men spoke of it, and got knocked down as damned liars by Thorburn's friends. Yet in ten days eight men were sitting in Doc Wilson's office, talking it over. Peavy Bill, Jem Norton, Martin, Doc Wilson, Billy Holman, the town marshal, and three others. Barney Chesman was a saloon owner, who had his house gambler with him. Curly Dugan, the gambler, was rated the squarest gambler in all the camps. Cal Woodrum offered to bet anybody, or fight anybody. "Art Thorburn is the straightest gent in the world, see?" he challenged.

"Sure, we all know that," Doc Wilson said, quietly, "but it ain't Art we—"

He stopped short. The front door opened, after slow steps had sounded on the wide porch. They all stared. The door swung shut, and Art Thorburn walked in two steps and stopped. Big, lean, wide shouldered. Grim faced and quiet mannered, he looked them all over—his

friends. He spoke in a very slow, even voice.

"You're my friends. You've all known me since I was a two-bit button riding my first bronc. How do you think I feel at finding you all here, talking over the dirty back-door bucket-drippings of gossip?" Like swine, wallowing in dirty swill, so you are. And you call yourselves my friends."

Their faces were getting red, for his words came straight from his heart and all knew it. Here was a man they knew and loved and had honored by giving him the highest office, the sheriff. Doc Wilson spoke quickly: "Art, it ain't you we're—"

"That's what hurts, 'cause it ain't me. Me, I'm a man. I could gun-whip some sense into you if you lied about me, so I could. I could fight you." He stared at them, hurt bitterness in his eyes. "But it's about Kate," he went on. "What can she say about your lies? She can't fight you. I can't fight this dirty, swill-wallowing woman's gossip. Sure, I've heard it; that she's a nobody-knows-who that married me an' tipped the Ghosts of Killer's Canyon off to the trap I laid; that the reason I was left alive was on account of her—so she'd do it again some time. A spy, for the Ghosts of Killer's Canyon—my wife!"

Art Thorburn looked them over with all the hurt bitterness of the past few weeks showing in his clean-cut and honest face. "Got two things more to say, an' then I'm through. Through in more ways than one. First is—when I get the Ghosts, I'm resigning. I'm taking my wife and myself out of a county that's watched me grow up, an' then turns on me at a time like this."

They started to protest, then stopped as he grimly waved his hand. So intent were they that they did not hear the clatter of boot heels on the wooden walk outside. Thorburn ended with: "Second thing is—I'll personally kill any man who

says my wife has any connection with that gang!"

"So?"

THE deep-voiced interruption came from the open door. It was Trainer, owner of the Black Butte mines. He stood there, gaunt, tall, looking like a minister. But his eyes were hot and angry. "So? Then tell me why your wife and Crazy Jennie was riding together toward the roadhouse, not two hours ago!"

Art Thorburn stiffened, and his hand went close to his gun. Something was holding him in a vise-like grip. Something that kept him from making a move. Kate, lovely, fragile, adorable Kate riding away with Crazy Jennie! He rocked a little, stood taut again. He remembered the curses that bleating voice had turned on him when he had been forced to turn Crazy Jennie loose that morning from jail—for the lack of evidence. And now, his wits wheeled in curious stinging circles; thoughts that seemed to scrape like hot and jagged tin, wheeled in his head. He said, slowly: "He's forced Kate to go with him, by threats. She has nothing to do with this. I won't kill you now, Trainer. I'll get your damn' bullion back, rescue my wife, and then by God—I'll kill you for saying that!"

Trainer spoke grimly, harshly: "Crazy Jennie had no gun. She was urging him on, when they passed me. I'll meet you with guns any time you name, lawman!"

Thorburn was shaking a little as he looked the group over. Not a man spoke, most of them would not meet his eyes. All knew what this meant to the fellow they had watched grow up, and elected to the sheriff's office.

"He's tricked her," Thorburn repeated, "told her there was a chance to get the bullion back!"

He spun and started to run for his office and the jail.

Thorburn crossed the dusty street on

the dead run. He needed a rifle and some shells, and his horse. He barged into the office, growling, cursing under his breath. And there, on his desk, as he jerked open the cartridge drawer, was a note. It was written in Kate's hand—no mistake about that. And coupled with what Trainer had told him, the thing was all too plain. For the note read:

"Art, darling, forgive me for what I've done. It did not work out the way I had planned. I can't go on. I'll try to get back the bullion for you. I'll love you always—I was mad to try to get away with this. I'd like to die—"

There was no signature. There did not have to be.

Thorburn groaned. He took two boxes of shells, a half dozen handcuffs from another drawer, and his rifle. He walked out stiffly into the slanting, last rays of the sun. He saw some men coming toward him. He knew, through the curious haze and the ghastly roaring sound in his head, that they were the men he had been talking to a few moments before. There were certain things a man like Thorburn would do automatically. He did them now. "Doc, Bill, read this. Trainer, I apologize. I won't kill you, because you and the others didn't lie. My wife is mixed up with the Ghosts of Killer's Canyon. I'll either be dead this time tomorrow, or have your gold back, Trainer. And I'll kill or jail the Ghosts of Killer's Canyon. All of them—including my wife!"

CHAPTER SIX

Lead for Gold

THE light at Crazy Jennie's roadhouse was like a beacon to Art Thorburn as he raced his horse along at top speed. He could see it for miles. As he neared it his heart was hammering as hard as his horse's hoofs. Was Kate there? He hit

ground running as his horse skidded to a stop in the soft dirt. His big shoulders hit the door and he smashed on into the room. There was no sign of Kate.

Crazy Jennie stood behind his small bar, and his great, puffy face was sardonic.

"Sucker!" He bleated the word in his maddening voice, like an enraged sheep, bleating queerly. But Crazy Jennie was no sheep. He was a huge, brawny, rough and tumbler fighter and who had run a dangerous roadhouse for years. He still was alive, and plenty of men who had jumped him with guns or knives were dead. Crazy Jennie preferred a bottle or a bungstarter. He said he liked the sound of the way the heads popped.

"Sucker!" He bleated it again and cackled a queer, crazed laugh. "Gawd, how I've laughed at you since you got roped in by that skirt. You, the honest, the square-shooting sheriff—married to a spy for the Ghosts!"

"Where is she now?" Thorburn spoke grimly. "Who are the Ghosts, anyhow? You and the Souter boys?"

"Don't tie me into it, you son!" Jennie shrilled. "Your dad tried that, years back—an' I'm still here!"

Art Thorburn, even sick and torn with what he learned that night, was still a fast thinker. He had certain things to do. He was putting ideas into place. He had to get the bullion, break up the gang—jail Kate.

"Dad always said you headed the Ghosts, years back. He couldn't prove it. He killed your brother, in that last fight—but he couldn't hang a thing on you. I'm going to do better, this time. I'll kill or jail all of you—"

"Even your wife, you fool?" Jennie sneered. "You ain't that crazy!"

He cackled with that maddening laughter of his. He said they had Thorburn on the wrong end of the stick. He was going to take it and like it. He cackled

and bleated until Thorburn almost went mad. But Thorburn's wits still worked. If he could make Crazy Jennie mad enough, the crazed hulk might spill something.

He said things to Crazy Jennie—things calculated to make him wild with rage.

As Art Thorburn finished, he grabbed at a bottle on the bar. He held it by the neck, and watched the flood of rage go over Crazy Jennie's great face. He heard the strangled bleating of curses. Crazy Jennie had his huge paw on the heavy bungstarter. He rushed around the small bar and faced Art Thorburn. He outweighed the sheriff close to a hundred pounds, and it was all not fat. He swung the bungstarter, liking the way heads popped under it.

Thorburn laughed, a bit madly. He moved like a cat, and the bottle swished in the air. There was a dull, cracking sound. The bottle went to pieces, and the bungstarter sailed through the air to land in one corner of the room.

Crazy Jennie bleated a curse. "I'll tear your heart out with my bare hands!"

"Where is Kate—and who are the gang she has been 'ping?"

CRAZY JENNIE rushed, instead of answering. He swung great sledge-hammer blows. Some landed, and he beat Thorburn back against the wall. Sliding along it, Thorburn hammered out a double dose of rights and lefts. Crazy Jennie's face went into blood. Thorburn danced away. He was letting the huge man rush him, for this added power and drive to Thorburn's own punches.

Thorburn kept hitting viciously, taking one punch to get in two or three. It was letting something out of him. A crashing blow from Crazy Jennie's maul-like right fist sent him reeling back across the room. He was falling. He hit the small table where the lamp was, and it went over with him. The lamp flared on the floor as

it broke, and the wick's flame set fire to the spilled kerosene.

Crazy Jennie bleated insane joy, "I'll crack your damned skull," he shrilled.

A wild leap carried him after Thorburn, and a punch sent the reeling sheriff careening sideways to land in a far corner. His head hit the wall with a smacking sound. He had been dazed, before, but that jar seemed to send a flare of half-sense through his reeling head. He tried to steady himself, found something under his hand.

With all he had left in his arm, Thorburn twisted and slashed with the bungstarter his hand had closed on. He felt it crunch home, heard a queer, popping sound, and almost went sick.

The room was almost like a stove now. Thorburn got on his feet, gasping and choking. He fumbled down, caught the limp body of Crazy Jennie, and dragged him feet first out into the night.

With Crazy Jennie's body safely away from the flames, Thorburn looked for his horse. There was plenty of light, but he wasn't seeing very well. Both eyes had been half closed by the maul-like fists hammering at them. His head ached and his eyes couldn't focus clearly on the four horses that were approaching as through a dream.

Then he saw that the first one was ridden by Kate. She had several canvas sacks tied behind her saddle. Her gun, a short-barreled .38, was in her hand. Beside her, just drawing, were the three Souters!

THORBURN made two moves so fast they seemed as one. He dove sideways from his horse and drew both guns in the same move. He rolled over, and saw lance-like splashes of flames. Bullets thudded near him, and he started to shoot. He was sure, as long as he lived, that Kate was shooting!

He felt lead hammer home twice, as he

fired so surely, so evenly. He was rolled clear over by a slug. He steadied himself. Kate was there, her horse prancing. One of the Souters still was shooting. Thorburn did not know which one it was. He stiffened his nerves, fired once. He saw the man go backwards out of the saddle. Then, grimly pulling himself to his feet, Art Thorburn did his duty as a sworn peace-officer. He fired a single shot over Kate's head and ordered grimly, "Drop that gun an' dismount. You're under arrest."

He wobbled toward her and clicked a pair of handcuffs on her pretty wrists. That done, he suddenly spilled down to the ground like a punctured balloon. . . .

Thorburn came back to consciousness by the still dancing flames of the burning roadhouse. He knew, somehow, that he had an unfinished job ahead of him. It was all cleaned up but that one thing—jailing Kate. That was the hard thing to do. That was why he was boiling with fury at Trainer, Peavy Bill, Doc Wilson and the others who had followed him from town. They wanted the handcuff key to turn Kate loose.

Trainer shook him and yelled angrily. "You crazy fool, you misread that letter."

The big mine owner was sputtering. Kate touched him with her handcuffed hands and said, "Let me." She turned to Art and said, "Forgive me. I grew up with the Souter family, though we're not related. Crazy Jennie got a hold on them, talked them into this. I never should have risked marrying you, for they were after me all the time to join with them. They threatened to kill *you* if I didn't play ball with them. I told Crazy Jennie I would. But I knew, finally, that it wasn't the way for the wife of a lawman to act; that neither of us could live with this shame over us. So today I vowed I would get back that bullion and square things. The Souters caught me here after I got the bullion from their fake mine. I shot one of them, Art!"

Thorburn whispered, softly, "Kate." He was fumbling with the key, as he whispered it again. Like a pledge, for a long, happy future, "Kate, my dearest."

The handcuffs dropped with a chinking sound, and her arms were about him.

THE END



A stirring novelette, "Smoke in the Hills," by John Murray Reynolds, about a Yankee's fight to save his loved ones while the Six Nations dance their covenant of war.

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Tolan . . . turned in the saddle, sending bullets at the two oldsters. . . .

NO JAIL FOR MOSSYHORNS

By GUNNISON STEELE

Old Pecos Blount and Rimfire Runnels, mossyhorn poverty ranchers, had naturally never heard the fable of the Trojan horse, so why shouldn't they split a couple of friendly quarts with their strange neighbors . . . or ever suspect that a hang-noose — sized to fit the neck of each — lurked in those two bottles?

THE SUN was going down, smearing the sky with tawny color when Pecos Blount and Rimfire Runnels saw the two riders coming along the trail

toward their log ranch house. The oldsters looked questioningly at each other.

"By gonnies, Pecos, what you reckon Russ Tolan and Jake Lamour are up to?" Rimfire asked.

"Don't be so distrustful, feller," Pecos grinned. "Mebby they just come a-visitin', neighborly."

"Taken 'em a long time to do it," Rimfire grunted. "Been four years since they

started that two-bit cow ranch over on Wolf Crick, and this's the fust time they visited anybody."

Rimfire Runnels was a runty, bald little gent with a long face and white drooping mustaches; Pecos Blount was fat, with cheerful, cherubic features. They had no particular liking for the surly and unsociable Russ Tolan and Jake Lamour. It had been whispered that their little cow outfit on Wolf Creek was a blind for other things.

Pecos and Rimfire hadn't paid much attention to these rumors. They just wanted to be left alone, to play out their strings in peace and quiet here on their own ranch. True, things hadn't been going so well lately. They owed some money to the bank in Ute Pass, but they'd be able to pay it this fall. . . .

Tolan and Lamour rode up and stopped before the ranch house. Jake Lamour was lithe and dark-faced, with a sly, secretive look about him. Russ Tolan was big, hawk-faced, with one eye that was blue and the other brown.

"Light down, gents," Pecos invited cordially.

Tolan and Lamour were smiling. "Don't care if we do," said Lamour. "You fellows ever take a drink?"

"Well, now. . . ." Pecos grinned.

Hardly ever," said Rimfire somberly, licking his lips. "You gents light down and come inside."

Tolan and Lamour dismounted, Tolan saying, "We were on our way out from town, so Jake says, 'Why don't we stop by and give ol' Pecos and Rimfire a drink? They're swell fellers.' I says, 'Why not?' So here we are."

They went inside. Tolan produced a quart bottle, and they drank. Pecos and Rimfire relished good whiskey, and this was good whiskey. They talked a while, then had another drink. The whiskey warmed Pecos and Rimfire inside; it made them think that maybe those rumors

about Russ Tolan and Jake Lamour being crooked and quarrelsome were all wrong. Tolan and Lamour were friendly, even jovial. They insisted that Pecos and Rimfire help them finish the bottle.

"Hear you wallopers've been havin' some hard luck lately," Lamour said.

RIMFIRE nodded darkly. "Rustlers been stealin' our cows. When we cut their sign, we'll dust the lousy sons off with some hot lead. You gents lost any stuff?"

"Not us," Lamour denied. "You got any idea who's been stealin' your stuff?"

Rimfire opened his mouth, and Pecos nudged him in the ribs. "No idea," Pecos said carelessly. "Is that bottle empty?"

Tolan appeared surprised. "Danged if it ain't. Jake, ain't you got another bottle out in your saddle pocket?"

"Sure," Lamour agreed readily. "Aimed to save it, but ain't nothin' like sharin' good likker with friends."

Lamour went out, and in a moment returned with a second bottle. By now it was dark, and the oldsters' heads were swimming a little. They didn't drink whiskey often. But, when Lamour opened the fresh bottle they each took a swallow. They couldn't risk offending visitors by refusing to drink with them.

For another hour they talked, drinking occasionally from the bottle. By then the bottle was empty, and Tolan and Lamour got up to leave.

"Me and Jake are just naturally friendly cusses," Tolan grinned. "Honest folks like us oughta been in bed hours ago."

They went out, and Pecos Blount whacked his runty partner powerfully on the shoulder. "What about it now, ol' hoss?" he grinned. "They wasn't up to no devilment, was they?"

Rimfire's head was spinning. He sat down again. "Don't savvy why they'd waste two quarts of good whiskey," he said.

"Because, like Tolan said, they're friendly cusses. We got to pay back their visit sometime. They're swell gents—this range has just got 'em branded wrong."

Rimfire wasn't convinced, and they argued about it. It was long past midnight when they went to bed. . . .

AT NOON next day, as Pecos and Rimfire were eating, a little cavalcade of horsemen rode up to the log ranch house and stopped. At their head was a big, blond, arrogant-faced young gent with a star on his gaudy vest. This swaggering young gent, the oldsters knew, was Jack Ivor, the new sheriff in Ute Pass.

A quick glance passed between Pecos and Rimfire. Ute Pass lay to the east, and the posse had come from the north, down out of the low hills.

Sheriff Jack Ivor, flanked by half a dozen possemen, pushed his way unceremoniously into the room. The possemen were cold-eyed and scowling as they looked at the oldsters, their hands on gun-butts.

Pecos grinned expansively, and said, "Howdy, Sheriff. We was just eatin'. You gents pull up chairs—"

Ivor sneered, "Cool ones, huh? It's no use. You ol' mossybacks get ready to ride."

Rimfire scowled, asked, "Where to?"

"To jail!"

The oldsters looked at the circle of hard, hostile faces, and decided that this was no joke. "What you figger to jail us for, Sheriff?" Pecos drawled.

Ivor said bluntly, "For robbery. And murder!"

Rimfire spat, "Why cuss and dang yore hide—" and stopped as Pecos nudged him in the ribs.

"Allus was ring-tailed hellions, me and Rimfire was," said Pecos calmly. "Who'd we kill this time?"

"Got a short memory, ain't you? If it

helps any, you killed old Bullhide Tate."

"Bullhide—dead? Hell, when'd that happen?"

"Happened last night, as you old gobblers damn well know," snapped the sheriff. A Y Bar puncher stopped by Bullhide's place this mornin' and found Bullhide lyin' dead on the floor of his shack. He'd been messed up some. Ever'body knows Bullhide didn't trust banks, and that he had some money cached about his place somewhere. You two knew it, didn't you?"

"Sure, we'd heard that," Rimfire said mildly. "But Bullhide was our friend. Lots of times we visited each other."

The possemen grinned tautly, and Jack Ivor said, "Sure, and that's what happened last night. Only, this time, you two decided to get his money. You had to stick some hot splinters into his feet to make him tell where it was hidden. But he talked. We found where the money'd been dug up back of the shack, and the empty tin can it was in."

"What makes you think me and Rimfire killed him, Sheriff?"

THE SHERIFF took a small, dog-eared notebook from his pocket. "You ol' coots recognize that?"

"Sure, that's our tally book," Pecos said readily. "Allus keep it in that bureau drawer over there. Where'd you get it?"

"On the floor of Bullhide Tate's shack!"

"That's a cussed lie," Rimfire said angrily. "I was lookin' at that tally book just yesterday, and it's been near a month since we was in Bullhide's cabin."

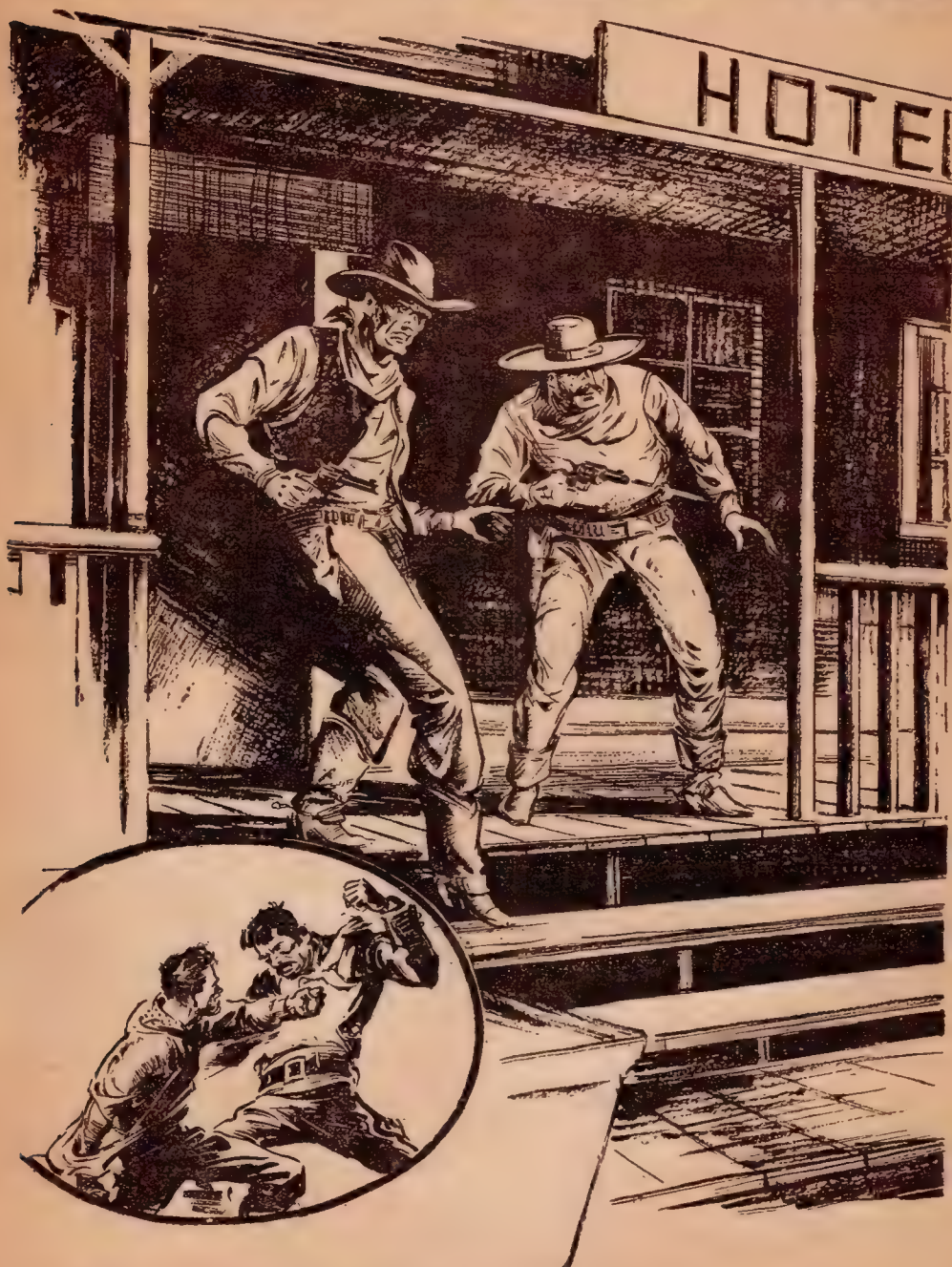
"Mebby it sprouted wings and flew over there," a posseman suggested dourly.

"Somebody else musta carried it," Pecos said weakly.

"And I reckon somebody else's horses left the tracks we followed here from Bullhide's cabin, huh?"

(Continued to page 106)

DEATH WAITS FOR



Stock Inspector Clyde didn't dare start a gunsmoke showdown with those cattle rustlers . . . not while they were hiding behind the girl he loved. There was another way, but it was lined with hair-trigger guns itching to blast him a Boothill tune of sixgun thunder!

THE RANSOM HERD

CHAPTER ONE

Gunsmoke Greeting

"CLYDE!" clipped Pecos Nash, as he and Clyde Burkett pushed out through the bat-wings of the End-of-Trail Saloon. "Look yonder!" His hand whipped the butt of his gun.

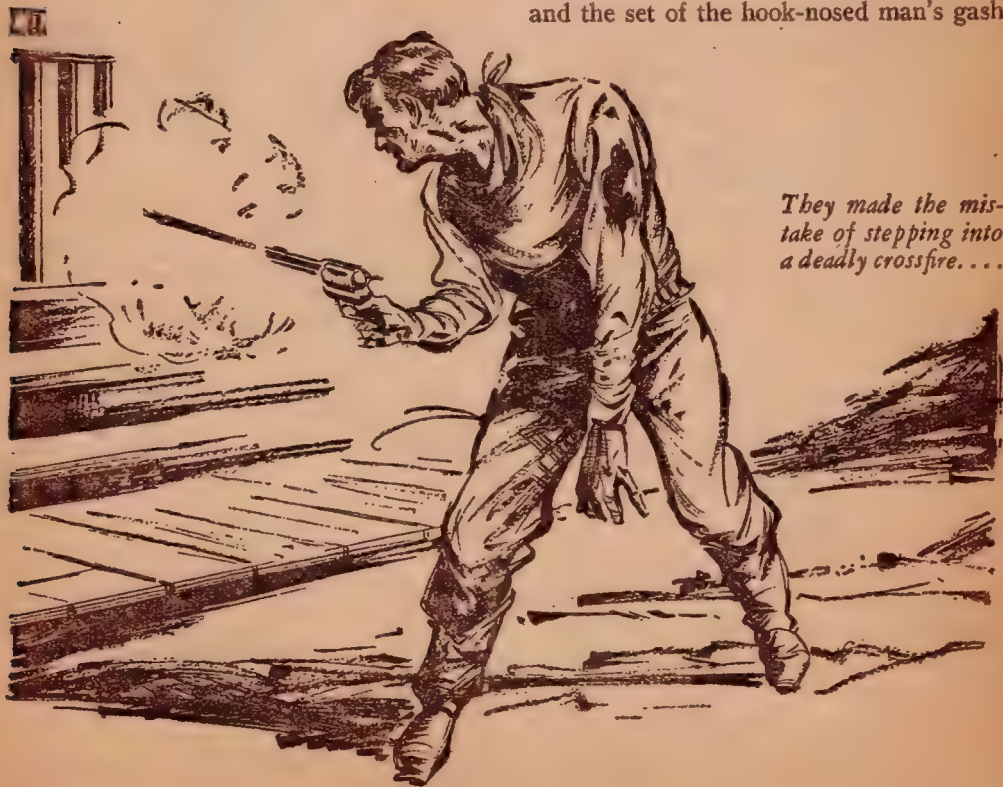
"You keep out of this, Pecos." Clyde Burkett had already spied the crooked-nosed man approaching diagonally across the street toward the saloon. Pecos Nash's dark eyes glittered with a hungry light, but he moved aside.

Clyde stepped across the narrow porch. He came to a halt in the middle of the

wide plank walk his maghogany-brown face bleakly cold. He had just rolled a cigarette. This he flicked away with a short, disturbed motion. The paper burst, and the light-brown tobacco flakes cascaded down to settle lightly on the reddish-gray dust of Rail City's one street.

The crooked-nosed man saw Clyde. He jerked up, swift recognition flaring in his eyes. He whipped a sharp glance first at Pecos, then to Clyde. He resumed his advance, only now he moved through the dust like a stalking puma, and his right hand hovered just ahead of the black butt of his holstered gun.

A drover stuck his head through the bat-wings, jerked back when he caught sight of Clyde's broad, tight-shirted back, and the set of the hook-nosed man's gash



They made the mistake of stepping into a deadly crossfire. . . .

Gripping Cattle-Trail Novelette

By JAY KARTH

mouth. His voice lifted to an excited whisper, seconds later three Texas men peered over the bat-wings. One of them spoke.

"Bet the barberin' costs, with a bath throwed in, on this near hombre—"

"You got yo'self a bet," grunted the second man. "That's Stub Lamb coming this way."

Stub Lamb! Eyes centered on the man's right hand. The last two fingers were gone at the first joint. The name flashed from tongue to tongue.

"He lost them two fingers over in southern Missouri the year after the war," said a Texas man low-voiced, "when him and Hank Quade tried to cut a herd of eighteen hundred threes Clyde Burkett was takin' up the trail to Sedalia. It's said that Burkett shot 'em off and run Lamb and Quade and their whole gang plumb into Injun Territory. Burkett was ridin' for Jackson Kane of the Double Anchor that year—"

"Ummmm," grunted the drover, "but Stub Lamb's lightnin' fast on the draw, just the same—"

STUB LAMB waited twelve feet from Clyde. "I been waitin' a long time—Mister Cattle Inspector," he said. His dark, crooked-nosed face was coated with a fine layer of trail dust, yet Clyde could see the tightening of jaw muscles, and knew that he was steeling himself for the draw.

"I warned you, Lamb," said Clyde flatly, "that I'd kill you if you crossed my trail again. Play your hand—"

Stub Lamb sneered. There was no fear in the man. He opened his gash mouth as if to speak, then his right fist blurred. The muzzle of his gun came up spitting flame. The butt jerked once in his hand, then his body stiffened as Clyde's slug smashed into his chest. His eyes opened wide with shock, followed quickly by a twisted grimace of pain. A crimson blotch wid-

ened rapidly across his gray cotton shirt front between the edges of his vest. His gun plopped in the dust, and he lifted both hands toward Clyde in what might have been a belated plea for life as the strength went out of him and he crashed in a motionless heap.

Clyde's bleak glance ranged the street. He stood motionless while he satisfied himself that Lamb had been alone. A deliberate man, he calmly reloaded his gun while he considered the outlaw's presence here in Rail City—that, and its sinister implications.

He lifted his head at the sound of the southbound mail buckboard rolling past, hugging the left side of the street to avoid Lamb's body. It was now that he saw the girl's lovely face for the first time, and a sharp pang of regret ran through him as he saw her wide, horror-filled eyes, and her full red lips parted in shocked amazement at this explosively unleashed violence. Then the buckboard, gathering speed, was gone in a cloud of dust.

Clyde stood staring into the obscuring dust wall long after the vehicle was swallowed up, a puzzled frown on his face. There was something familiar about the girl, although he was positive that he had never seen her before. Finally Clyde shrugged and turned toward the porch of the End-of-Trail.

"I DON'T like it, Pecos." Clyde shook his head. The two men were bellied up to the counter in the Chink restaurant adjoining the End-of-Trail.

"You mean you think—"

"Yeah. Stud Lamb in Rail City means Hank Quade is somewhere along the Chisum, which also means Al Doan ain't far off—"

"Where do you figure they're likely to be?"

"Close enough that we're hittin' the trail—I figure Indian Territory, or mebbe along the Arkansas."

Finally Pecos said, "I reckon pickin's been middlin' slim over on the St. Looney an' Sedalia trails through the Ozarks since '67."

Clyde nodded. His long, slender fingers played a light tattoo on his coffee cup. He stared down into the steaming black liquid, and a feeling of regret ran through him. With Hank Quade and Al Doan along the Chisholm Trail it meant bloodshed and heavy losses to owners and drovers.

Clyde drained his coffee cup. Reaching for tobacco he rolled a cigarette.

"You're worried about Colonel Kane, Clyde." Pecos reached for the tobacco sack.

"He's three weeks overdue—"

"Mebbe high water's holdin' him back."

"Other herds are comin' through."

Clyde exhaled a streamer of smoke into the empty coffee cup.

"You think right smart of Jackson Kane, don't you."

"He saved my life once."

"Yeah, I remember," Pecos said.

"With Hood at Spring Hill, wasn't it?"

"Uh-huh."

"How many head's he pushin' up the trail this year?"

"About thirty-eight hundred."

Pecos whistled softly. "If anything happens to them, after losin' them herds last year an' the year before—"

"Hank Quade said he was goin' to break the Colonel," said Clyde, anger darkening his face. "The dam' guerrilla!"

Pecos stared at Clyde soberly. "I'd remember Hank said he'd smoke you down first chance he had," he grunted warningly, "an' not stew so much about the Colonel."

"You tryin' to scare me?" Clyde reached back and took his dove-gray Stetson off the rack. "Let's get out of here."

They breasted through the restaurant door. Clyde's sharp blue eyes narrowed as he watched a man push through the

doors of the End-of-Trail and disappear inside. He clipped tersely to Pecos, standing at his shoulder, "I'll meet you at the stable. . . ."

THE crowded saloon, noisy a moment before Clyde stepped through the batwings, became quiet as a tomb. Even whispered words jarred the ear-drums. Clyde's sharp eyes searched the crowd, finally coming to rest on the face of a man who had just stepped up to the far end of the bar. When the silence descended over the long room, he turned so that he was facing toward the front. He saw Clyde's tall, deep-chested figure standing alone and his fat face, already white, turned a sickly yellow.

"Olds," called Clyde across the space separating them, "Olds."

The fat-faced man cringed back against the bar. "No!" he cried. "No! No!" His pudgy, groping hand located the glass of whiskey on the bar. He gulped it down.

Clyde's right hand dropped to the black bone handle of his gun. "Come out here," he said coldly.

Still grasping the empty whiskey glass in his trembling hand, the fat man moved fearfully toward Clyde. A wide lane opened between them. A voice jarred through the silence from somewhere across the room, "Hell, I know that hombre—" The voice died away.

"What do you want with me, Burkett?" Olds' greenish, bulging orbs held fearfully on Clyde's grim face as he stepped away from the bar. "So help me, Burkett, I'm straight now. *What are you going to do?*"

"That's close enough," said Clyde harshly. Olds halted ten feet away. "Men," called Clyde, "take a good look at this man. He's Ike Olds, the crookedest cattle buyer ever run out of St. Louis." An angry murmur mounted.

Clyde went on, "He was run out of St. Louis because he was buyin' rustled

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ACE-HIGH WESTERN STORIES

beef from Hank Quade's outfit at cut prices, while he let honest stuff go beggin'." To Olds Clyde said: "There's a train east before sundown. You be on it—"

"But—but that's a cattle train!" Olds lifted his fat hands beseechingly. "I wasn't stopping here, Burkett. I was going through to Buffalo Flat—"

"Which do you hanker for most," interrupted Clyde, "to put on a party for a carload of prime steers, or would you like to have these boys stage a nice, sociable necktie party for you?"

"I—I'll go," chattered Olds.

"Let him out," called Clyde to the circle of faces.

A lane opened to the bat-wings. Olds, half running, lost no time in escaping from the hostile End-of-Trail.

CHAPTER TWO

Prairie Murder

"**T**KE OLDS is in Rail City," mused Clyde, twisting around to adjust his cantle roll. The big red roan under him jogged easily southward. Clyde looked off across the prairie, stretching endlessly until it merged with the distant horizon. He counted seven big herds pulled off at a safe distance from each other, waiting to move in to the pens and loading chutes. He knew that the trail brands of those outfits were in order. Only yesterday he and Pecos had given the last arrival, a TI. herd, a clean bill of health.

"Is Olds buyin'?" asked Pecos. He squirted a stream of brown tobacco juice at the toe of his left boot. He cursed under his breath when he realized too late that his aim had been too accurate.

"He won't be," replied Clyde. "A delegation is seein' him off—in a cattle car."

"Them steers'll be in bad company," grunted Pecos.

They topped a swell. A cooling breeze

ran across the prairie, bending the tall grass in its path. Two miles ahead, in the broad, reddish-brown band that was the Chisholm Trail, Clyde saw a great cloud of trail dust from which shortly emerged the leaders of another big herd, with point men drifting along on either side.

Clyde and Pecos circled off the trail, cutting back in to meet a swing man riding midway along the three-quarter mile long herd. The rider's left arm was in a crude neckerchief sling.

"Trouble?" asked Clyde, as he and Pecos ranged up and drifted with the crippled swing-man.

"Three weeks back," was the non-committal reply.

"That'd be about the Salt Fork of the Arkansas—"

"A day this side."

"Who's your trail-boss?"

"Tex Rayburn. You'll find him back in the chuck-wagon."

Raising his hand in a farewell salute, Clyde swung the red roan. With Pecos riding even-stirrup, he loped toward the chuck-wagon, trailing the herd. As they passed the *remuda*, Pecos grunted, "This outfit sure looks done in. I figure they're short three men anyhow, and that ridin' stock yonder's been rode hard."

CLYDE did not reply. They rode up alongside the chuck-wagon. He raised his hand again, this time in a command to halt. The cook pulled up on the reins.

"Where's Rayburn?" said Clyde.

"Dead. Body's inside there." The cook jabbed a thumb over his shoulder.

"Why ain't he been planted?"

"Just died this mawnin'. He wanted to be planted in a pine box. Allowed he'd be too cold in nothin' more than a saddle-blanket. Reckon that's the only reason he hung on so long, so's we'd take him on into Rail City—"

"Where's your *segundo*?"

"Ridin' point. Reckon you've already seen we're some short-handed."

Clyde nodded. "Who did this?"

"Tex figured it was Hank Quade's outfit, though he wasn't sure. They hit us at night."

"Lose any cattle?"

"Some."

"Any news of Kane's Double Anchor outfit?"

The cook was smoking an evil-smelling pipe. He puffed for a moment. "Only that it's behind us."

"How long since the mail buckboard passed you, headin' south?"

"Good four hour. The herd was still grazin'."

"Uh-huh," said Clyde, "thanks." He reined away from the side of the chuck-wagon.

The cook clucked to his mules. As the wagon with its grisly load began to move, the cook nodded in farewell. "So long."

Late that night Clyde and Pecos rode up to a small cluster of buildings on the north bank of Cottonwood Creek. This was Waco Young's Trail Store.

"Looks like everybody's bedded down for the night," said Pecos.

Clyde nodded. "Yeah." He studied the darkened windows, then his gaze shifted to the corrals. He uttered an exclamation of relief. "The mail buckboard's here." Since leaving Rail City he had struggled to solve the riddle of the girl's familiar features, and an undefinable feeling of uneasiness had ridden with him since morning. Now, perhaps. . . .

A peal of thunder rolled across the sky. Before they could reach the shelter of the buildings they were soaked to the skin as a swift summer shower swept across the prairie.

Clyde called out, "Hello the store!"

A window opened inward, and a voice called, "Who's out there?"

"Clyde Burkett and Pecos Nash, Stock

Inspectors. Are you Waco Young?"

"Yeah." There came a brief shuffling from the window. "Put your hosses in the shed. You'll find feed out there. Then come around front."

Waco Young proved hospitable. He boiled coffee, and brought out a platter of cold roast. They ate while their clothes dried in front of the rock fireplace.

"You're ridin' late," observed Young.

"We'd hoped to reach Kane's Double Anchor camp tonight, but seems they're farther out than we expected. You had any word?" Clyde looked at Young.

"Some riders from the Lazy-W outfit, which's pulled off the trail three miles south, rode in early tonight after tobacco. They said Kane's herd is about twenty miles back, just this side of the Arkansas." Young refilled the two big cups with steaming coffee. "Which reminds me," he added, "Kane's daughter was here tonight."

"**H**UH!" Pecos Nash exclaimed. He looked at Clyde.

Clyde's blue eyes turned cold. It had been the girl's resemblance to Colonel Kane, then, that he had recognized. And now he understood the reason for his uneasiness. His lips became a thin straight line. "Did you say she *was* here?"

Young nodded. "Yeah. Came in on the mail buckboard, which laid over here. She'd just finished her supper and was in her room when four men come from the Kane outfit and got her. Said her Pa wanted her to ride on out to camp. They said somethin' else about Kane havin' been busted up a bit the other night when the herd got its tail up durin' a thunder storm."

The only sound for a time was the slap of the rain on the low roof, and the breathing of the three men. Then Pecos scraped a match head across the rock surface of the fireplace and lit a cigarette. The smell of steam rising from the wet clothing

draped over the backs of four chairs was strong in the room.

Clyde asked, "Who's drivin' the mail buckboard?"

"Fellow named Vic Zant—"

"It ain't a usual thing for him to lay over here at Cottonwood, is it? Seems they could make Tanner's without any trouble."

Young shrugged. "Sometimes they do and sometimes they don't."

Clyde reached for his gray woolen shirt. "We're ridin', Pecos."

Pecos flipped his cigarette into the fireplace and reached for his own clothes. "You think—"

"I don't think Colonel Kane's girl will ever reach the Double Anchor camp. . . ."

Clyde turned to Young. "You better let us have some dry tobacco," he said. He strapped his guns around his waist and reached down for the ties.

When Waco Young returned with the tobacco, he said, "You can't follow the girl in this storm, Burkett. Hell, tracks was all washed out ten minutes after it started rainin'."

Clyde shook his head. "Where's Zant bunkin'?"

"He's in yonder." Young nodded toward the door on the north side of the room.

Clyde motioned. Pecos jerked his head in understanding, and moved on tiptoe to a position on the right of the door.

"Look here, Burkett, I don't want no—" Young paused and bit his lip as he saw the futility of argument.

Clyde walked toward the door. Six feet from the panel he halted. "Zant," he called sharply. "Zant—come out here."

There was no reply.

Clyde motioned Waco Young to the side of the room out of the probable line of fire, then moved silently on the thin-soled toes of his boots until he stood inches from the wall, slightly to the right of the door.

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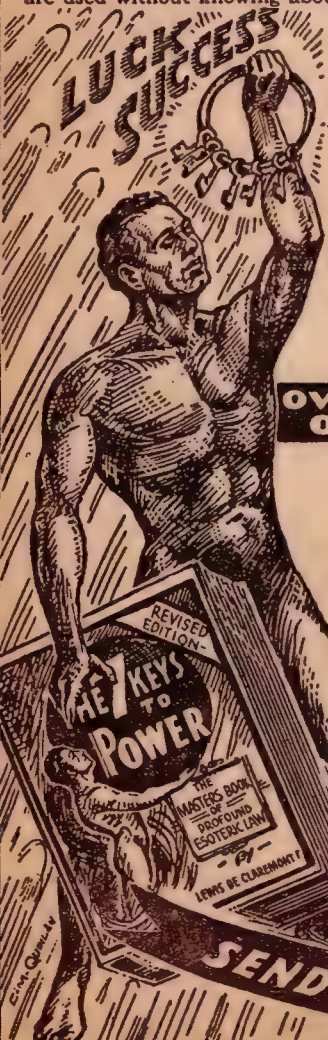
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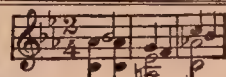
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ACE-HIGH WESTERN STORIES

"Zant," he called again, positive now that the buckboard driver was mixed up with the girl's disappearance. "You better come out."

Still that deep silence.

IT WAS raining harder now. Clyde was acutely aware of the rain drops drumming on the roof as the fingers of his right hand closed around the door latch. With a rapid movement he lifted the latch, and shoved hard. The door crashed inward. It slammed against some obstruction in the darkness and shivered to a standstill just as flame lanced out of the stygian blackness and a gun thundered twice.

Clyde touched Pecos with his fingertips, indicating a water-filled wooden bucket standing on a crude table in the corner of the room only a half dozen feet from Pecos' right hand. Pecos nodded. He slid to the table. Taking bucket in hand he edged toward the fireplace. Clyde threw a thundering shot through the door to protect Pecos from angle fire. Pecos calmly loosed the contents of the bucket over the logs in the fireplace, smothering the blaze. The men heard a muffled curse from the other room. Pecos drew his Colt. Drawing a bead on the wick-flame in the lamp standing on the big table in the center of the room he shot it out, throwing the room into darkness.

"Zant," called Clyde, "I'm comin' in."

A hate-filled voice spat out of the darkness. "Come ahead, Burkett. I'm goin' to gut-shoot you plumb to hell."

"You recognized that voice, Pecos?" murmured Clyde.

"Sure," snorted Pecos, "and his name ain't Vic Zant. That's Al Doan—"

"I got a slug for you, too, Nash," snarled Al Doan.

"You sure do change your name fast, Al," said Clyde.

"Yeah," growled Pecos. "What're you

goin' to call yourself when I blow you into Kingdom-Come?"

The man inside the room snarled unintelligible words. Clyde heard liquor gurgle. The odor of bad whiskey cut through the powder smoke.

"He's skeered, Clyde," jeered Pecos.

"Al," said Clyde, "we'd figure to give you a chance if you'd tell us where the Kane girl is bein' taken."

"I'll see you in hell first!" gritted Doan.

CHAPTER THREE

Death in the Lamplight

CLYDE hunkered down just outside the door. Transferring his gun into his left hand he tossed his wide brimmed Stetson along the floor. Three flashes of flame lanced out at the noise. A gun roared in the darkness. Clyde reached back and lifted Pecos' hat from his head. He tossed it into the other room near the first. Again the gun roared, twice. Then Clyde heard the hammer click on an empty chamber. Doan cursed.

Now Clyde was in the room with Doan. There came a sharp peal of thunder, and lightning arrowed across the storm-swept skies. In the eerie glow Clyde saw Al Doan's short, squat figure crouched against the wall, frantically endeavoring to reload his gun.

Clyde launched his lean, hard-muscled frame with pantherish swiftness. His left fist crashed into the squat man's middle, and Doan expelled air with a loud *whoosh*. Clyde felt him double over, heard the empty gun clatter against the hard wooden flooring.

"Pecos," called Clyde, "get light." And then he was too busily engaged with the powerful Doan to speak again. Long arms wrapped around his body in a viselike, crushing grip. Doan's right hand slid up under his chin, closed agonizingly on his throat.

It required all of Clyde's strength be-

fore he broke the painful hold, and he felt weak and spent for a moment. He stood in the darkness gulping deep draughts of air.

Pecos entered the room with a lighted lamp in his left hand, and his Colt gripped in his right. Doan's thick lips were drawn back in a bestial snarl, his discolored teeth showing like the fangs of a lobo wolf. Hate for Burkett had driven fear out of him. He leaped forward, his long arms extended. Clyde moved aside and whipped a hard left to Doan's heart, then stepped in and smashed a terrific right across to the bearded jaw, jarring the outlaw back on his heels.

Blood ran from Doan's mouth and nose. There was a gap where two teeth had been. Clyde was aware of Pecos and Waco Young standing tense across the room. Thunder again ripped the sky. Doan crouched, then leaped in, his heavy fists flying. Clyde felt the wall against his back and slid to the left. Doan followed. They moved back to the middle of the room. Here they stood toe to toe, slugging. Clyde moved back one step, then slid in under a looping left. His fist ripped into Doan's stomach. The man doubled and groaned, but fought to straighten up. As his chin lifted, Clyde smashed a paralyzing uppercut against the stubbled point, and Doan crashed to the floor.

CLYDE pressed his fingers into the tired muscles of his arms while he stared down at the beaten outlaw. His own face was practically unmarked, but Doan's mouth and nose still bled, dying his dark beard a deep crimson.

Clyde rolled the outlaw's body over with the toe of his right boot. Doan groaned again, and raised himself up on his left elbow. His eyes came into focus and he caught sight of his empty gun lying ten feet across the floor. He made a frantic effort to reach it, but Clyde stopped him with his left hand twisted in the checkered

shirt. He pulled Doan roughly to his feet.

"Get in yonder," he said evenly. He shoved Doan through the door, then followed.

Pecos placed the lamp on the table in the middle of the room, then crossed to lean against the fireplace. Waco Young fluttered nervously about, his eyes always on Clyde's face.

"Where's Hank Quade, Al?" Clyde's voice was very grim.

Doan spat. His flat face remained totally expressionless.

"I ain't goin' to fool with you," warned Clyde. "You talk fast or we'll plant you out yonder in the mud before we leave here—"

"I don't know," growled Doan.

"Get his gun, Pecos," said Clyde thinly.

"What you aim to do, Burkett?" asked Doan.

Clyde didn't answer. When Pecos returned from the other room with the gun, Clyde said, "Load it."

A moment later he took the loaded gun from Pecos. Keeping his own weapon levelled at Doan's heart, he moved toward him. He motioned with the muzzle of his gun, and Doan turned so that his back was to Clyde. Clyde thrust the reloaded gun into the outlaw's worn holster, then backed away.

"Now," said Clyde softly, when he was ten feet away from Doan, "you can talk—or start shootin'. Where's Quade?"

Doan swung around, a dangerous flare in his eyes. This was unexpected reprieve, and he was afraid of no man when he had a gun in his fist. "Go to hell!" he gritted. Then he drew....

Doan's gun was almost clear of its holster when Clyde's right hand blurred. The two shots thundered as one. But Doan's bullet dug into the floor, while Clyde's slug smashed into the outlaw's chest. His lips were still twisted back in that malevolent snarl as he fell.

There was a bitter regret in Clyde's

blue eyes as he looked down at the dead outlaw, regret that this man should die without revealing Hank Quade's plans.

"**P**ECOS." Clyde extended his hand.

Both reined in. From the top of a hill they looked down across a broad slope to the Arkansas bottoms. A mile ahead, at the foot of the slope, Clyde and Pecos saw a strange sight. Two big herds were moving out from what appeared to be a common center. One, slightly the larger, grazed north, a half mile west of the broad chocolate band of bare, hoof-trampled earth which marked the Chisholm Trail. The second herd was being hazed west and slightly north along the river. Strangest of all, to Clyde, was the fact that the scene up ahead was a peaceful one. For he could see that this was Jackson Kane's Double Anchor herd, and it wasn't Kane's way to give up almost half of his herd without a fight.

"How do you figure it, Clyde?"

"Hank Quade!"

"But where in tarnation is he goin' with fifteen hundred head of rustled beef?"

"What would you do, Pecos," said Clyde, "if you had fifteen hundred head of Double Anchor steers and knew that if you drove them to Rail City, or Junction City, or Baxter Springs, you'd run afoul of an army of Stock Inspectors?"

Pecos turned back the collar of his canvas coat and scratched his neck. "Damned if I know," he grunted. "Unless it'd be to sell 'em to the Injuns. But he's headed away from Injun Territory—"

"There are plenty of contracts bein' let for beef to supply the Reservations up Montana way," said Clyde thoughtfully. The two herds were now a good mile and a half apart. "If Quade had a buyer who knew the ropes, there wouldn't be too many questions asked."

"You mean somebody like—like Ike Olds?"

Clyde nodded, blue eyes studying the

herd moving up the bottom. He reckoned there were about fifteen riders over there.

"But Ike Olds is headed east—if he stayed put on that train."

Clyde shook his head. "I don't think he stayed put."

Pecos eyed him curiously.

"Back in the End-of-Trail," supplied Clyde, "Olds let slip that he was headed for Buffalo Flat, forty miles west of Rail City. Now if Quade is drivin' to Montana he would push up the Arkansas to the big bend, then turn due northwest. This would bring them to the Smoky Hill River about forty odd mile west of Buffalo Flat. Ike Olds could meet them there, or in Buffalo Flat, and go on north with the drive—"

"You really think Olds had the guts to turn back west?"

"At twelve to fourteen dollars a head, fifteen hundred threes will bring eighteen to twenty thousand." Clyde nodded. "I think he'd chance it for a slice of that."

CHAPTER FOUR

Gun-Trap

THEY rode toward the herd which was grazing in their direction. To avoid being observed by the distant group they rode east until they were protected by the near herd, then swung around south. They swung wide of the herd, for it gave every indication of nervousness, after a wet night, and Clyde reckoned it wouldn't take much to make them stampede.

They were sighted by Jackson Kane while they were yet a quarter of a mile from the remuda. Kane rode toward them, flanked by two riders. Clyde reined in while the ranchman was yet two hundred yards distant. He raised his hand in a gesture of greeting.

Kane recognized him now, and said something to his two riders. They pulled up and rode back toward the remuda,

while the owner of the Double Anchor rode forward.

"Hullo, Colonel," said Clyde.

"Clyde," replied the older man, and Clyde saw that his face was lined with worry. "Pecos."

"Howdy, Colonel," said Pecos.

Clyde studied Kane's face. The same powerful, craglike features, he thought, yet there was a look of hopelessness in the deep-set eyes peering out from the shadows of shaggy brows, and new streaks of gray speared across his temples. The mournful chant of a swing rider venting his disgust at the bad weather, and at the same time soothing the restless sea of longhorns, drifted across the heaving mass of wet backs.

"Quade?" asked Clyde.

"Yes," replied Jackson Kane. "How did you know?"

"We saw your girl in Rail City—found out who she was too late. Quade had Stub Lamb there to see that nothin' went wrong with his plans, and he's had Al Doan drivin' the mail buckboard south out of Rail City for some weeks. They took her at Waco Young's, last night.

The grizzled Double Anchor owner was silent for a time. He stared down at the chocolate-brown mud underhoof. Finally he asked, "What about Lamb and Doan?"

"Dead," replied Clyde briefly.

CLYDE shook his head worriedly. The three men were grouped at the chuck-wagon, with big cups of steaming black coffee in their hands. It had stopped raining, and the sun was slanting through broken cloud masses. The herd, up ahead, grazed quietly. Riders sat their mounts automatically, snatching short catnaps. It had been a hard night.

Clyde looked at the owner of the Double Anchor. "Colonel," he said, "you willin' to let me play this my own way?"

"My girl Millie's life is probably at stake, Clyde—"

"I know." Deliberate, Clyde shaped his thoughts in his mind before he again spoke. "Way things stand now, you've lost fifteen hundred head of cattle, and you don't know that Quade will turn your girl loose after he gets in the clear. It's a wild country off northwest. An army might search for months and never find a trace of them if Quade wanted it that way." Clyde touched the older man on the arm. "Quade hates you like poison, you know—"

"What's your plan, Clyde?"

"I think Millie's bein' held in Buffalo Flat, or somewheres close by. It'll take Quade nine or ten days to drive to the Smoky Hill River. Pecos and I can be in Buffalo Flat tomorrow night." Clyde paused. The cook filled his coffee cup again. "Once we find your girl and get her away from Quade's men, we can go after him—"

"I gave him a bill of sale—"

"I wouldn't worry about that." Clyde's blue eyes were opaque. "I wouldn't worry about that," he repeated grimly, "after Millie's safe."

"All right," agreed Kane gruffly, "but you be careful. I don't care a damn about that stuff Quade drove off this mornin' if it means anything is goin' to happen to my girl. I just want her back, alive and—"

"I know."

CLYDE and Pecos reached the Smoky Hill, three miles southeast of Buffalo Flat, in the late afternoon of the following day. They found the water rolling, and were forced to swim their horses. Reaching the opposite shore they grazed their horses and smoked while their clothes dried out in the sun's hot, slanting rays. Clyde did not want to reach the town until after darkness had fallen.

When they rode in, they left their horses at the lone livery stable, then walked across the street to the City Hotel, where they obtained a single room and

made guarded inquiries. The inquiries proved unavailing, however. The flat-chested clerk merely shook his head negatively to all questions.

There were two saloons, one next to the hotel, the other at the far end of the street. After a substantial meal in the restaurant in the middle of the block, they divided their time between the two saloons, keeping their eyes open.

At ten-thirty Clyde said, "Looks like they're holed up, if they're here at all."

Pecos said, "Yeah."

"You better turn in," said Clyde. "I'll mosey around for a while longer."

A half hour later Clyde turned toward the hotel. Passing the desk he said, "Goodnight," to the clerk, and climbed the stairs. As he walked along the narrow hall he heard sounds of sleeping men through the thin walls. A bed squeaked as a sleeper shifted his body. A loud snore beat through the sound of his own boots clumping against the hard wooden floor. A drunken man cursed behind a door on the right, and he heard a woman's voice, as she cried out in pain. He shrugged. He always felt stifled when hemmed in by four walls, and tonight these alien noises irritated him. He reached the door to his room. Turning the knob, he stepped across the threshold, reaching into his vest pocket for matches. He stiffened. The darkness swam with the odor of men, and of horses. That in itself was all right, because Pecos should be sleeping in the bed on the opposite side of the room. But Pecos, if asleep, should also be snoring. And the room was still as a tomb. Warning bells sounded in Clyde's brain.

The hard muzzle of a gun jammed against his body just under his left shoulder blade. A long unheard voice whispered harshly, "One move, Burkett, and I'll blast you to Glory!"

"If you've done anything to Pecos Nash, Quade—" gritted Clyde.

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The muzzle of the gun gouged deeper. "Shut your trap or you'll be kickin' up long grass." The hidden man jabbed again, and Clyde was glad that the darkness hid his face as his lips jerked up in pain. "Outside," continued Quade, "and straight down the hall to the back. If you yowl just once I'll drill you!"

As they moved along the hall, Clyde was conscious of a second presence at his back, keeping step with Hank Quade. At the end of the hallway a flight of rickety stairs led to the ground level.

As they descended these stairs Quade growled, "When we get outside, turn left and walk along like we was goin' to a weddin', all friendly-like. And don't forget, Burkett, I'm just waitin' for a chance to open you up with a load of hot lead."

Clyde remained silent, as did Quade's companion. They reached the door. As Clyde reached for the latch Quade's gun dug in warningly. "Careful."

They were in the open now, behind the

row of clapboard buildings. Only the light from the stars penetrated back here. Clyde turned left and moved ahead, his body tensed for the break he hoped would come. Off to his right he heard the Smoky Hill waters, a high murmur of sound. One of the men behind him stumbled over a loose board and cursed.

"Could I smoke, Quade?" murmured Clyde.

"Don't be a fool," growled the outlaw. "Keep movin'."

THEY passed the end of the last building on the street. "Straight ahead" said Quade. Now, three hundred yards beyond the cluster of buildings, Clyde saw the shadowy outlines of a log cabin in a clump of tall cottonwoods. Light pencilled from one of the burlap-covered windows.

For the first time, the second man spoke. "Hank," he said wheezily, "Squaw's bein' careless."

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Quade growled, "I see it." That was all, but Clyde felt a shiver course along his spine. For a moment the only sound was the clump-clump of booted feet on the hard earth, sun-baked after the rain. They approached the cabin. Clyde heard a hoarse laugh from inside the building. Quade growled some unintelligible word just before they reached the door.

He called out, "Squaw." The laugh was cut off short. There came an interval of silence. "Squaw." Quade's harsh voice was more insistent.

Now a voice called through the door. "That you, Hank?"

"Open up," replied Hank Quade.

The latch clicked, and the door opened. "Inside, Burkett."

Clyde stepped inside and looked around. There were three men in the room beside himself and his two captors. The man Quade had called Squaw stood grinning evilly at him. In the west corner of the room Pecos Nash lay huddled on the floor. He had been gun-whipped. His face was a mass of bruised flesh and caked blood, and at first Clyde did not know if he lived or not. The third occupant stood on the right side of the rock fireplace, a cruel grin on his fat face, his thick-fingered hands interlocked across his paunch.

"Well, well," said Ike Olds malevolently, "so the great Burkett walked into a trap!"

"YOU'RE a brave man, Ike," said

Clyde evenly, "when you've got a half dozen bad men to back your play—"

Stark hatred flared in the crooked cattle buyer's little eyes. He sidled away from the fireplace, his fat hand sliding to the holstered gun at his side. "I been waitin' for a chance like this since St. Looney—"

"Ike!" Quade's harsh voice lashed out. "This has to be handled clean."

Ike Olds' thick lips curled, but his hand halted its movement to his gun.

"Squaw," said Quade, his thin, high-boned face plainly revealing a deep-running anger, "there's light gettin' out that window. Chink it up, you dam' crazy breed, afore we have unwelcome visitors."

These two men were not friendly, and Squaw watched Quade sullenly for a moment before he turned and shuffled across the room. Pecos Nash groaned and half lifted his right hand, then let it drop back. His lips moved, as if there were an unpleasant taste in his mouth.

"Who used a gun on Nash's face?" Quade looked from Ike Olds to Squaw. Both stood silent, watching him. Squaw's back was turned then, as he threw a blanket over the window. Olds stared uneasily at the floor.

"I said who blotted Nash's face with a gun?"

Squaw turned and stared hard at Ike Olds. Olds, feeling the half breed's gaze upon him, shrugged his fat shoulders. "He got tough," he said, still looking at the floor.

"Come here, Ike," said Hank Quade coldly.

Olds obeyed, swinging wide around Clyde. Clyde watched Quade's face. That face did not change expression as the outlaw raised his right hand and whipped his gun down across Ike Old's face, laying the flesh open from hair-line to base of jaw. Olds dropped like a pole-axed steer.

"I owe you thanks, Quade," murmured Clyde.

"You don't owe me nothin', Burkett," said Quade shortly. "If he'd smoked him down I'd say good riddance. I'd finish you both off now, only I may have need for you later."

"As you say." Clyde looked beyond Quade to the man who had been with him in the hotel room. He was a stranger. He stood, pale-eyed, waiting for Quade to command.

Quade said, "Turn around, Burkett." Clyde swung around.

"Tie him up," ordered Quade, "and do a good job. He's slicker'n all get out."

A moment later Clyde was tossed in the corner with the unconscious Pecos.

"You two stick here," Quade ordered the pale-eyed man and Squaw. "I'm goin' back up town. The boys ought to be ridin' in any time. When Ike wakes up tell him to keep his gun in the leather, or I'll drill him."

As the door closed behind Quade, another door on the opposite side of the room swung open and a slender, full-breasted figure moved forward into the light. Clyde caught his breath sharply, and his heart pounded and tugged inside his chest.

"Oh!" Millie Kane cried. Her hazel eyes were very wide as they centered on Clyde's lean face, her soft full lips half parted.

"Ma'am," said Clyde quietly, "we always meet under such unfavorable conditions. I'm sorry."

Millie Kane's slender white hand pressed against her lips. She stared at Clyde a moment longer; then, without looking at the other men in the room, she turned and fled back into her room. The door closed and Clyde heard the snap of the latch.

IKE OLDS sat in the middle of the floor, holding a red bandana against the side of his face. He stared hungrily at the door through which the girl had disappeared. He felt Clyde's hard gaze beating against him and looked quickly away.

Clyde lay still after the cattle buyer turned his attention to another section of the room. Only his hands and wrists moved as he worked cautiously to loosen his bonds before Quade returned. He fought the rope until his raw wrists burned agonizingly, until his arms were numb from the elbows to the finger-tips.

Squaw was playing solitaire with a deck

of greasy cards. Olds nursed his torn face and stared moodily into the fire. The pale-eyed man leaned against the far wall, catnapping. Time passed, Clyde could not judge how much. He seemed no nearer freedom than at the beginning, and his right hip and leg were numb. And then he felt Pecos move. Pecos' long years of experience on the trails stood him in good stead now: he regained consciousness without sound. His hands groped silently until they touched Clyde's arms, slid to the wrists. Squaw peered in their direction once, then turned back to his cards. There was no sound from the room in which Millie Kane had shut herself.

Pecos worked quietly. He had to nudge Clyde when the rope dropped from his wrists. Clyde's wrists were void of all feeling.

Through slitted eyes he studied the room: It was a long twenty-five feet to the table before which Squaw played his game, an equal distance to the pale-eyed man. Olds, by the fireplace, was a good twelve feet from Clyde. Clyde decided that the pale-eyed man against the wall was asleep now. Squaw sat with his left side toward him, which meant that he would have to drag his gun from his right side, swing it up and across the table in order to bring it into firing line. This would give Clyde an advantage of precious seconds. He gathered his muscles.

Ike Olds lifted his bulk erect and turned half facing Squaw. Clyde, with a pantherish leap, caught the fat man's neck in the vise of his crooked left arm. The fat body became a protecting bulwark. Olds' gun was in Clyde's right hand, and crimson flashes accompanied the thundering roar as it spat death towards Squaw and his companion. Squaw's gun roared, too, and Clyde felt Olds' body quiver as the slugs ripped into it. Then it was over. Squaw, the pale-eyed man and Ike Olds were dead, huddled on the floor.

Clyde let Olds' heavy body fall on its

side. "You all right, Pecos?" he asked.

Pecos was sitting up. "I reckon," he grunted painfully. "How do I look?"

"You look like your face'd been drug through a chaparral thicket."

"So long's there ain't no bones busted—" Pecos climbed experimentally to his feet. He smiled through the blood caked on his damaged face.

Clyde knocked on Millie Kane's door. "Miss Kane," he called, "come out, please."

The girl's voice was steady as she replied through the panel. "How do I know I'll be safe?"

"Ma'am," replied Clyde, urgency in his voice, "I'm Clyde Burkett, Stock Inspector. I used to work for your dad. You'll have to take my word for that just now. But if you don't come out pronto I'll have to come in after you."

The door swung open. Millie Kane stood before Clyde. Then she saw the three bodies sprawled on the floor. Her slender figure swayed. Clyde reached out to catch her, but she quickly recovered. And then her soft hazel eyes were those of a lonesome, frightened and homesick girl. "Is my father all right?"

"He's all right, Ma'am," confirmed Clyde gently.

"SO YOU'RE in this, too," said Clyde coldly.

The flat-chested hotel clerk whirled, his face a chalky white. He dropped Clyde's guns, which Quade had tossed on the bed when he surprised Clyde earlier that night, and his saddle-bags, which he had been in the act of removing from the room. His mouth dropped open. He trembled violently.

Pecos shook his blood-smeared head reprovingly. "That Quade feller's sure bad company for a greenhorn to herd with."

Clyde, Pecos and Millie Kane had entered the hotel by way of the same door through which Clyde had been taken.

"Ma'am," said Clyde after the clerk was securely bound and gagged, "this is the safest place in town for you just now, if you can handle a gun."

Millie bravely extended her right hand. "I can handle a gun," she said. "What is it you want me to do?"

"Stay here," said Clyde, "and ride herd on this hombre." He looked at her soberly. "And," he added, "no matter what you hear outside, don't move!"

Millie Kane's soft ripe lips were a firm line as she took the heavy Colt from Clyde's hand. "Do what you have to do," she said bravely.

Pecos Nash blurted, "She's sure Jackson Kane's filly!"

Millie Kane looked away quickly. Crimson spread upward from the base of her shapely throat. Clyde's heart pounded. At that moment the rattle of gun fire swept the street below. Clyde heard glass tinkle somewhere, and a voice shouted, "Hank! Jackson Kane's here with his Double Anchor crew!"

CHAPTER FIVE

Powdersmoke Payoff

CLYDE crossed the room with a rush. He flattened out against the wall and peered down into the street. Flame lanced from the side of the livery stable. Two buildings up, another man triggered his gun, and the accompanying flame flash told Clyde what he wanted to know.

"Pecos," he called softly, "they've got the Colonel holed up in the saloon next door."

Pecos grunted. Star-gleam, slanting through the curtainless window, struck light on the polished barrel of the gun he held in his gnarled hand. A Sharps roared below, but the muzzle flash was not visible from where they stood. Now a half dozen guns hammered. A horse

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Size	Rim	Tires	Tubes
29x4.0-21	2.15	\$1.05	\$0.34
29x4.50-20	2.35	1.05	31
30x4.50-21	2.40	1.10	32
32x4.75-19	2.45	1.25	33
32x4.75-20	2.50	1.25	34
32x5.00-19	2.50	1.25	35
30x5.00-20	2.55	1.25	36
28x5.25-19	2.55	1.30	37
28x5.25-20	2.55	1.30	38
30x5.25-20	2.55	1.35	39
31x5.25-21	2.55	1.35	40
31x5.50-17	2.55	1.35	41
32x5.50-18	2.55	1.40	42
29x5.50-19	2.55	1.40	43
30x5.50-19	2.55	1.40	44
31x5.50-19	2.55	1.40	45
32x5.50-20	2.55	1.40	46
32x5.50-21	2.55	1.40	47
32x5.50-22	2.55	1.40	48
32x5.50-23	2.55	1.40	49
32x5.50-24	2.55	1.40	50

REGULAR CORD TIRES

Size	Tires	Tubes	Size	Tires	Tubes
29x4.0-21	\$2.35	\$0.95	32x4.75-19	\$3.45	\$1.45
29x4.50-20	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-20	3.45	1.45
30x4.50-21	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-21	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-19	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-22	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-20	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-23	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-21	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-24	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-22	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-25	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-23	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-26	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-24	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-27	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-25	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-28	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-26	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-29	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-27	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-30	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-28	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-31	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-29	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-32	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-30	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-33	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-31	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-34	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-32	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-35	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-33	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-36	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-34	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-37	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-35	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-38	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-36	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-39	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-37	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-40	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-38	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-41	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-39	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-42	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-40	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-43	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-41	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-44	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-42	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-45	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-43	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-46	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-44	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-47	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-45	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-48	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-46	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-49	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-47	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-50	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-48	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-51	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-49	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-52	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-50	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-53	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-51	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-54	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-52	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-55	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-53	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-56	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-54	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-57	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-55	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-58	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-56	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-59	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-57	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-60	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-58	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-61	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-59	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-62	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-60	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-63	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-61	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-64	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-62	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-65	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-63	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-66	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-64	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-67	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-65	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-68	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-66	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-69	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-67	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-70	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-68	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-71	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-69	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-72	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-70	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-73	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-71	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-74	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-72	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-75	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-73	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-76	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-74	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-77	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-75	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-78	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-76	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-79	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-77	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-80	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-78	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-81	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-79	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-82	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-80	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-83	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-81	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-84	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-82	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-85	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-83	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-86	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-84	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-87	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-85	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-88	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-86	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-89	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-87	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-90	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-88	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-91	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-89	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-92	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-90	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-93	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-91	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-94	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-92	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-95	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-93	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-96	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-94	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-97	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-95	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-98	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-96	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-99	3.45	1.45
32x4.75-97	2.35	1.25	32x4.75-100	3.45	1.45

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Tires	tubes	Size	Tires	tubes
\$4.25	\$1.95	34x7	\$10.95	\$4.65
3.95	1.75	38x7	10.95	4.65
4.25	2.25	36x8	11.45	4.95
7.95	2.95	40x8	13.25	4.95
9.95	4.45			

WITH this burst, the firing died away. Clyde called out, "Colonel, you all right?"

There was no reply for a long minute, then Kane, his deep voice hoarse, replied, "Right as rain, Clyde."

"Hold your fire." Clyde looked up toward the hotel window. He saw Millie Kane's anxious face framed there, and lifted his hand reassuringly. Now he turned his attention to the man pressed against the wall of the saloon across the street.

"Will you give up peaceful, Hank?" he called.

Hank Quade shook his head. "Come and get me, Burkett," he replied.

Clyde had always known that this meeting would take place, and that when it came it would be on a winner-take-all basis. He stepped into the street and moved toward Hank Quade who had reached the middle of the opposite boardwalk. There was a faint, twisted grin on the outlaw's hawk-beaked face. The same grin was fixed on his face when his right fist swooped with practiced swiftness to his hip and brought up a roaring, flaming .45 Colt. . . .

The short space of time which Clyde allowed to elapse between his and Quade's draw proved almost too great a handicap to overcome. But not quite. Clyde's slug found the grinning outlaw's heart, and the force of its impact threw Quade's aim off. His lead whipped past Clyde and smashed into the wall of the building behind him. Hank Quade had ridden his last trail.

Jackson Kane crossed the low porch of the saloon, flanked by four of his Double Anchor crew. His left arm hung limp. Clyde looked at him, his blood still pumping strongly from the heat of the moment just past. "Millie is safe," he said.

Jackson Kane said, "Thanks, Clyde," then stared down at Hank Quade's dead

body. His voice was filled with a grim thankfulness. "The Chishum will be a safer trail for other Texas men who come after us. . . ."

JACKSON KANE looked at Clyde as the last steer trotted between the point, a slow smile breaking across his face. "Thirty eight hundred to the head," he said.

Clyde nodded, "My tally, too."

Kane looked at the buyer, who nodded in agreement.

Clyde, sitting easily erect in the hull, with his big red roan under him again, watched Pecos Nash and Millie Kane ride across the prairie from the direction of Rail City, their horses moving at a gentle jog. A sharp loneliness ran through him as he watched the girl.

"Millie and I were talking last night, Clyde," said Jackson Kane, his voice a gentle rumble, "and we decided that I need you very much back on the Double Anchor—"

Millie Kane reined her horse opposite Clyde's roan, stirrup to stirrup. There were soft lights in her hazel eyes. Her full young breasts were strangely disturbed as she spoke softly, "Won't you come home with us, Clyde?"

"Is there a spot on the payroll for Pecos?" murmured Clyde.

"Thought that was understood," said Jackson Kane gruffly.

"You two are inseparable," said Millie Kane.

"Ma'am," said Pecos, little mirth devils dancing in his sparkling black eyes, "when Clyde gets hitched I figure to be at the other end of his apron strings—we're that close—"

Millie Kane laughed. Then the golden-brown of her smooth cheeks was suddenly suffused with a deeper color, and her hazel eyes were very soft as she looked straight at Clyde Burkett.

(Continued from page 85)

"What trail's that?" He squinted at the two oldsters.

"We found where a couple of brons had been tied in a thicket behind Bullhide's shack. The trail circled off through the hills, then came straight to your corral gate out there. That clinches it. Get their guns, boys."

Pecos and Rimfire offered no resistance as the possemen stripped them of their scarred old guns. They were a little dazed by what was happening. They knew that Sheriff Jack Ivor was a swaggering, bragging show-off who thought he knew all the tricks, and wanted to impress folks with his bravery and smartness. But Ivor wasn't dishonest; he really thought Pecos and Laramie were guilty.

"Where's the money you took off ol' Bullhide?" Ivor was asking. "Might as well come clean—that tally book, and the trail to your corral gate means a hang-noose anyhow."

"By gonnies, we'll see about that," Rimfire said fiercely. "We didn't kill Bullhide, and the jail ain't been built that'll hold us!"

"It'll hold you, all right," said the sheriff. "I was smart enough to catch you, and I'll be smart enough to keep you!"

Twelve hours later, Pecos and Rimfire had just about decided that the sheriff was right. The Ute Pass jail was a pretty solid structure. They'd tested the bars, and found them fool-proof. That was the only way out, except through the cell door and on through the sheriff's office in front where Jack Ivor was now asleep on a cot.

The oldsters knew that they were in a tight spot. They didn't savvy who'd left their tally book beside Bullhide Tate's dead body and made that trail from Bullhide's shack to their corral. The tracks, Ivor had said, led to the corral, and then had stopped. No fresh tracks left the corral.

Pecos asked, "What about it, ol' hoss?"

We was purty drunk when Russ Tolan and Jake Lamour left last night. You reckon we could have done them things, without knowin' it?"

"We been twice as drunk, without killin' anybody," said Rimfire. "Nope—some lousy son cold-decked us, I figure."

"But how about them hoss tracks? Coupla brons made tracks to our corral, and stopped—and there ain't no hosses but ours in that corral. How you explain that, Rimfire?"

"I don't," grunted the runty oldster. "We got to get outa here and find out what's what."

"Suits me," said Pecos. "You got any ideas?"

"There's ways of gettin' outa jails," Rimfire said vaguely, "without bustin' out. Figger it's your fault we're here, in the first place."

"My fault? How in tarnation you figger that, you ol' puma?"

"Why, if you'd had the sense of a jay-bird you'd uh knowed that posse was up to devilment when you saw 'em comin'."

THE ARGUMENT waxed hotter, and the whole building echoed with their angry, belligerent voices. They yelled names and insults. Finally Pecos swung a fat fist, and that started it. The din increased as they jarred to the cell floor.

Awakened by the noise, Sheriff Jack Ivor came running along the corridor. He was clad in a flapping nightgown, holding a lamp in one hand, with his two fancy guns strapped about his waist.

He stared amazedly at the two mauling, clawing, yelling figures rolling about on the cell floor. "What'n blazin' blue hell's goin' on here?" he asked angrily.

If the battling oldsters heard him they gave no sign. So Ivor unlocked the cell door and lunged inside. He set the lamp on the floor, seized Pecos Blount and Rimfire Runnels by the collars and yanked them apart.

NO JAIL FOR MOSSYHORNS

"You two want to wake up the whole town?" snarled the sheriff. "What you fightin' about, anyway?"

"I gonnies, it worked, Rimfire!" Pecos chuckled.

Jack Ivor made a funny noise in his throat, and reached for his guns. But Pecos and Rimfire had them; they'd snaked the pearl-handled guns from their holsters as Ivor yanked them to their feet. Pecos had one, Rimfire the other, and they were pointing at the gaping sheriff.

"Sorta tricked you, Sheriff," Pecos said mildly. "Had to do it, on account of you was too bull-headed to listen to reason."

"You ol' catamounts can't get away with this," Ivor said furiously. "I'll track you down if it takes—"

"Like you tracked us from Bullhide's cabin, huh?" Rimfire sneered. "Pecos, you reckon I better warp this gun-barrel over his skull, to sort of keep him quiet?"

Jack Ivor's face paled. He stammered, "I—no need of that. I won't make any racket."

"We'll just tie 'im up, and stuff some rags in his mouth," Pecos decided.

This they did. Then, taking Ivor's guns and some extra cartridges, they locked Jack Ivor in the cell and went outside. It was long past midnight, and Ute Pass lay quiet and still.

Pecos and Rimfire went through an alley and to a pole corral back of a livery stable where they knew the sheriff had left their horses that evening. To their relief, they found that the corral gate was unlocked. Hastily they saddled their gaunt horses, mounted and rode out of town.

BULLHIDE TATE'S shack lay fifteen miles northwest of Ute Pass, and it was almost dawn when Pecos and Rimfire arrived there. It wasn't likely that the sheriff would be discovered, trussed in the

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cell, before daylight. Nobody would be trailing them until well up in the morning.

In the chill half-light of dawn they examined sign in the jackpine thicket back of Bullhide's shack where, two nights before, two men had left their horses while they tortured and killed a man. The possemen had confused the sign, but the oldsters saw enough to tell them that Jack Ivor had told the truth.

Tracks of two horses led into the thicket, and the same tracks left the thicket by another course and led westward toward the foothills. This set of tracks were the ones Jack Ivor had followed to Pecos's and Rimfire's ranch.

Pecos and Rimfire paid scant attention to these tracks. It was the incoming tracks that riveted their eyes. These tracks led at an angle away from the others, to the northwest. Carefully the oldsters examined the tracks. Then they grinned, got onto their horses and set out on the backtrail of the killers.

"Funny way to trail owlhooters—backward," Pecos grinned. "You reckon it'll work, Rimfire?"

"Can't tell," Rimfire grunted.

Squinty eyes glued to the ground, they rode on, and the sun arced into the sky. The killers had made no effort to conceal their backtrail. Pecos and Rimfire followed the tracks into a rough, rocky section of the hills a few miles from Bullhide's cabin.

And there, where the trail emerged from a swift, shallow little stream, they lost it. They forded the stream, but found no tracks entering the stream on the other side. They rode for a mile along the stream, on both sides, but found no sign of tracks entering the creek.

The only tracks they found were those of a couple of horses leaving the stream on the far side. Pecos and Rimfire examined these new tracks. They were entirely

different from those they'd been following backwards.

"It don't make no kind of sense," Pecos said, grinning.

"Plumb mystifyin'," Rimfire agreed.

They got back on their horses and followed the new tracks—not backwards now, but forward. The trail led them out of the rough section and across the plain. And, after about an hour, they approached a log cabin ranch house that was cradled in a little valley and hemmed by red cliffs.

A couple of riders were driving a herd of scrawny cows into a corral near the cabin. When they saw Pecos and Rimfire, they let the cattle scatter, and sat slouched in their saddles with gun-butts jutting forward. The oldsters rode up and stopped a few yards away.

PECOS BLOUNT was grinning. But Rimfire's long face was dour and scowling as he looked at Russ Tolan and Jake Lamour.

"Howdy," Pecos said easily. "You boys feelin' well today?"

"Well enough," said Tolan cautiously. "I—hell, I thought you ol' coots were in jail."

"Was," said Pecos. "But we ain't now. We got to thinkin' about things, and broke out."

Lamour asked softly, "What things?"

"Why, about you two stoppin' by a coupla nights ago and givin' me and Rimfire that expensive likker, for one thing."

"What about it?"

"Why, it was a swell thing to do. So me and Rimfire decided to pay back that friendly visit."

Lamour's off-color eyes were hard and watchful. He said, "Sure, that's okay—only me and Russ don't want to get mixed up with the law. We're peaceful, law-abidin' citizens."

Old Rimfire shifted impatiently in the saddle, the fury that he'd kept bottled up for several hours suddenly boiling over.

"Yeah, you are—like hell!" he sneered. "You wouldn't think of goin' against the law, would you?"

Tolan and Lamour exchanged quick glances. Something quick and wolfish kindled in their eyes and leaped out to warn Pecos and Rimfire. The dark-faced Tolan purred, "Such as what, old man?"

"Such as stealin' a tally book from a bureau drawer, and leavin' it beside a man you'd murdered!"

There was another silence, broken by Lamour's harsh, nasal voice: "Is that all?"

"Such as makin' tracks that made it look like me and Rimfire done the killin'," Pecos said almost cheerfully. "Mebby you gents can explain them things?"

"Sure, we can—easy."

"How?"

"This way," Lamour spat, and grabbed for his gun. And Russ Tolan, wriggling like a dark snake, stabbed for his gun, too.

PECOS and Rimfire weren't caught napping; they'd known what to expect. Lightning-fast, Jack Ivor's fancy guns were in gnarled fingers. A quick, savage wave of sound burst over the corrals and hemming cliffs.

A bullet from Rimfire's gun got Lamour in the arm, and his Colt slithered from his nerveless fingers. He rammed in the hooks and started away from there, fast. Tolan's gun was blasting red tongues of flame that licked out from its muzzle like a snake's tongue. Tolan also turned under the slamming slugs from the pistols of Pecos and Rimfire. But he turned too late. As he sided his pardner in their escape, turning in the saddle to send bullets at the two oldsters, Pecos Blount took a careful aim. The pearl-handled gun belled, and Tolan tumbled to the dust. He lay there, whimpering and moaning with a broken shoulder.

But Lamour was tougher. He leaped down, jerked Tolan's gun, and it was

blazing again. Rimfire swayed in the saddle, and blood cascaded down over his face from his forehead. But he caught himself, lifting the gun again, and it's deep-throated thunder rolled among the red walls.

Then, suddenly, the sounds of battle died away, and the gunfight was over.

Pecos was untouched. Rimfire had a bullet gash across his forehead, and he was weak and sick but not badly hurt. Jake Lamour's off-color eyes stared unseeingly at the sky. Russ Tolan still lay on the ground, babbling out his confession, begging them not to kill him. . . .

THE sun was going down that evening as they rode into Ute Pass. Behind them they led two horses. Russ Tolan rode one of the horses, and strapped to the other was Jake Lamour.

A kid's cries brought men pouring into the street, converging on the two grim-faced oldsters. But Pecos and Rimfire rode on, ignoring the questions that were hurled at them, till they came to the sheriff's office. There they stopped.

Rimfire asked, "Where's the sheriff?"

"Out trailin' you gents," somebody said. "What you ol' cougars been up to now—you done killed another man?"

There was a sudden commotion along the street, and somebody yelled, "Here comes the sheriff!"

Half a dozen possemen, mounted on exhausted horses and led by Sheriff Jack Ivor, came along the street and stopped at the edge of the crowd. They saw Pecos and Rimfire, and guns leaped into their hands. Then they pushed their way forward and confronted the oldsters.

Pecos and Rimfire didn't move. "This time," said Pecos, "there's *not* any mistake. Sheriff, there's your killers!"

The sheriff turned and looked at the white-faced Tolan, at the still figure strapped to the other saddle, and asked, "Why'd you shoot these men?"

"Dang it, I told you," Pecos said impatiently. "They killed Bullhide Tate. Tolan's ready to confess—ain't you, Tolan?"

"I—yes, if you'll promise to protect me," Tolan whimpered. "We killed the ol' coot, all right, and got his money. What I don't sabe is, how'd you two ring-tailed hellions cotton onto it?"

"I don't get it," Jack Ivor said. "If Tolan says they killed old Bullhide, I reckon they did. But what about them tracks that led from Bullhide's shack to your ranch—and then stopped?"

"Them tracks," said Pecos, "was made *before* Bullhide was killed. Tolan and Lamour left 'em, night before last, after payin' me and Rimfire a visit and stealin' our tally book. And, sheriff, you done exactly what they meant for you to do—you followed their backtrail!"

"Backtrail? You're loco! The trail was there, plain as day."

"Sure it was," Pecos nodded. "Too plain. If me and Rimfire had killed Bullhide we wouldn't have been crazy enough to leave tracks you could follow. Neither were Tolan and Lamour. That other trail—the one you thought was a backtrail—was the one you should have followed."

"I still don't savvy," Ivor muttered.

PECOS went on, "When Injuns wanted to leave a trail that made it look like they was goin' in the opposite direction from which they was really goin', they'd wear their pacs backward. It works the same way with a horse. Only, when the shoe's on right, the toe leaves a deeper imprint than the heel—when it's on backward, the heel goes deeper. It's easy to spot the trick, if you knew how."

"Tolan and Lamour had made some little doo-dads like that which fitted over their horses' regular shoes, and which could be put on or taken off in a minute or two. They put the doo-dads on their broncs when they left our place two nights

NO JAIL FOR MOSSYHORNS

ago, and went straight to the thicket behind Bullhide's cabin. That's the trail you gents followed. Me and Rimfire followed what looked like a backtrail, to where they took the doo-dads off in Wolf Creek, and then followed their regular trail on to their place. There was a little ruckus, and here they are. Simple, wasn't it?"

Jack Ivor's face was red. He said, "I'd have cottoned onto it, in a little while. Can't no owlhooter fool me for long."

A laugh went up, and the crowd gathered closer, slapping Pecos and Rimfire on the backs, inviting them to have drinks. "Well, now . . ." said Pecos, and Rimfire's long face split in a grin.

An hour later, Pecos and Rimfire remounted their tired horses and headed for their little cowranch. They were tired and sore, but in high spirits. They were heroes—and the free drinks were warm inside them.

"What about it now, ol' hoss?" Pecos chuckled as they rode along. "We ketched us a coupla killers, and we showed up that smart-alec sheriff, didn't we?"

"We did, for a fact," Rimfire agreed. "But I was scared stiff Jack Ivor was gonna ask us how we found out that that Injun trick would work just the same on hosses."

"That's right," Pecos grinned. "It woulda been plumb embarrassin' to admit to the sheriff we learned that trick years ago when we was ridin' with the Wild Bunch, wouldn't it?"



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